

JOHN
WYNDHAM

When Collier's published John Wyndham's serial, *The Revolt of the Triffids*, two years ago, they hardly knew what they were starting. Since then, the inhabitants of a large fraction of the earth's surface—including Holland, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, the United Kingdom and miscellaneous other areas—have had opportunity to read about Wyndham's famous man-eating plants in one or another of the dozen editions currently in print. But Wyndham's novels are only a part of his wonderfully literate and entertaining writing; it would be a pity if they were to overshadow such bright short stories as . . .

The Chronoclasm



I first heard of Tavia in a sort of semi-detached way. An elderly gentleman, a stranger, approached me in Plyton High Street one morning. He raised his hat, bowed, with perhaps a touch of foreignness, and introduced himself politely:

"My name is Donald Gobie, Doctor Gobie. I should be most grateful, Sir Gerald, if you could spare me just a few minutes of your time. I am so sorry to trouble you, but it is a matter of some urgency, and considerable importance."

I looked at him carefully.

"I think there must be some mistake," I told him. "I have no handle to my name—not even a knighthood."

He looked taken aback.

"Dear me. I am sorry. Such a likeness—I was quite sure you must be Sir Gerald Lattery."

It was my turn to be taken aback.

"My name is Gerald Lattery," I admitted, "but Mister, not Sir."

He grew a little confused.

"Oh, dear. Of course. How very stupid of me. Is there—"

he looked about us, "—is there somewhere where we could have a few words in private?" he asked.

I hesitated, but only for a brief moment. He was clearly a gentleman of education and some culture. Might have been a lawyer. Certainly not on the touch, or anything of that kind. We were close to *The Bull*, so I led the way into the lounge there. It was conveniently empty. He declined the offer of a drink, and we sat down.

"Well, what is this trouble, Doctor Gobie?" I asked him.

He hesitated, obviously a little embarrassed. Then he spoke, with an air of plunging:

"It is concerning Tavia, Sir Gerald—er, Mr. Lattery. I think perhaps you don't understand the degree to which the whole situation is fraught with unpredictable consequences. It is not just my own responsibility, you understand, though that troubles me greatly—it is the results that cannot be foreseen. She really must come back before very great harm is done. She must, Mr. Lattery."

I watched him. His earnestness was beyond question, his distress perfectly genuine.

"But, Doctor Gobie—" I began.

"I can understand what it may mean to you, sir, nevertheless I do implore you to persuade her. Not just for my sake and her family's, but for everyone's. One has to be so careful; the results of the least action are incalculable. There has to be order, harmony; it must be preserved. Let one single seed fall out of place, and who can say what may come of it? So I beg you to persuade her—"

I broke in, speaking gently because whatever it was all about, he obviously had it very much at heart.

"Just a minute, Doctor Gobie. I'm afraid there is some mistake. I haven't the least idea what you are talking about."

He checked himself. A dismayed expression came over his face.

"You—?" he began, and then paused in thought, frowning. "You don't mean you haven't met Tavia yet?" he asked.

"As far as I know, I do. I've never even heard of anyone called Tavia," I assured him.

He looked winded by that, and I was sorry. I renewed my

offer of a drink. But he shook his head, and presently he recovered himself a little.

"I am so sorry," he said. "There has been a mistake indeed. Please accept my apologies, Mr. Lattery. You must think me quite light-headed, I'm afraid. It's so difficult to explain. May I ask you just to forget it, please forget it entirely."

Presently he left, looking forlorn. I remained a little puzzled, but in the course of the next day or two I carried out his final request—or so I thought.

The first time I did see Tavia was a couple of years later, and, of course, I did not at the time know it was she.

I had just left *The Bull*. There was a number of people about in the High Street, but just as I laid a hand on the car door I became aware that one of them on the other side of the road had stopped dead, and was watching me. I looked up, and our eyes met. Hers were hazel.

She was tall, and slender, and good-looking—not pretty, something better than that. And I went on looking.

She wore a rather ordinary tweed skirt and dark-green knitted jumper. Her shoes, however, were a little odd; low-heeled, but a bit fancy; they didn't seem to go with the rest. There was something else out of place, too, though I did not fix it at the moment. Only afterwards did I realize that it must have been the way her fair hair was dressed—very becoming to her, but the style was a bit off the beam. You might say that hair is just hair, and hairdressers have infinite variety of touch, but they haven't. There is a kind of period-style overriding current fashion; look at any photograph taken thirty years ago. Her hair, like her shoes, didn't quite suit the rest.

For some seconds she stood there frozen, quite unsmiling. Then, as if she were not quite awake, she took a step forward to cross the road. At that moment the Market Hall clock chimed. She glanced up at it; her expression was suddenly all alarm. She turned, and started running up the pavement, like Cinderella after the last bus.

I got into my car wondering who she had mistaken me for. I was perfectly certain I had never set eyes on her before.

The next day when the barman at *The Bull* set down my pint, he told me:

"Young woman in here asking after you, Mr. Lattery. Did she find you? I told her where your place is."

I shook my head. "Who was she?"

"She didn't say her name, but—" he went on to describe her. Recollection of the girl on the other side of the street came back to me. I nodded.

"I saw her just across the road. I wondered who she was." I told him.

"Well, she seemed to know you all right. 'Was that Mr. Lattery who was in here earlier on?' she says to me. I says yes, you was one of them. She nodded and thought a bit. 'He lives at Bagford House, doesn't he?' she asks. 'Why, no, Miss,' I says, 'that's Major Flacken's place. Mr. Lattery, he lives out at Chatcombe Cottage.' So she asks me where that is, an' I told her. Hope that was all right. Seemed a nice young lady."

I reassured him. "She could have got the address anywhere. Funny she should ask about Bagford House—that's a place I might hanker for, if I ever had any money."

"Better hurry up and make it, sir. The old Major's getting on a bit now," he said.

Nothing came of it. Whatever the girl had wanted my address for, she didn't follow it up, and the matter dropped out of my mind.

It was about a month later that I saw her again. I'd kind of slipped into the habit of going riding once or twice a week with a girl called Marjorie Cranshaw, and running her home from the stables afterwards. The way took us by one of those narrow lanes between high banks where there is barely room for two cars to pass. Round a corner I had to brake and pull right in because an oncoming car was in the middle of the road after overtaking a pedestrian. It pulled over, and squeezed past me. Then I looked at the pedestrian, and saw it was this girl again. She recognized me at the same moment, and gave a slight start. I saw her hesitate, and then make up her mind to come across and speak. She came a few steps nearer with obvious intention. Then she caught sight of Marjorie beside me, changed her mind, with as bad an imitation of not having intended to come our way at all as you could hope to see. I put the gear in.

"Oh," said Marjorie in a voice that penetrated naturally, and a tone that was meant to, "who was that?"

I told her I didn't know.

"She certainly seemed to know you," she said, disbelievingly.

Her tone irritated me. In any case it was no business of hers. I didn't reply.

She was not willing to let it drop. "I don't think I've seen her about before," she said presently.

"She may be a holiday-maker for all I know," I said. "There are plenty of them about."

"That doesn't sound very convincing, considering the way she looked at you."

"I don't care for being thought, or called, a liar," I said.

"Oh, I thought I asked a perfectly ordinary question. Of course, if I've said anything to embarrass you—"

"Nor do I care for sustained innuendo. Perhaps you'd prefer to walk the rest of the way. It's not far."

"I see. I am sorry to have intruded. It's a pity it's too narrow for you to turn the car here," she said as she got out. "Good-bye, Mr. Lattery."

With the help of a gateway it was not too narrow, but I did not see the girl when I went back. Marjorie had roused my interest in her, so that I rather hoped I would. Besides, though I still had no idea who she might be, I was feeling grateful to her. You will have experienced, perhaps, that feeling of being relieved of a weight that you had not properly realized was there?

Our third meeting was on a different plane altogether.

My cottage stood, as its name suggests, in a coombe—which, in Devonshire, is a small valley that is, or once was, wooded. It was somewhat isolated from the other four or five cottages there, being set in the lower part, at the end of the track. The heathered hills swept steeply up on either side. A few narrow grazing fields bordered both banks of the stream. What was left of the original woods fringed between them and the heather, and survived in small clumps and spinneys here and there.

It was in the closest of these spinneys, on an afternoon

when I was surveying my plot and deciding that it was about time the beans came out, that I heard a sound of small branches breaking underfoot. I needed no more than a glance to find the cause of it; her fair hair gave her away. For a moment we looked at one another as we had before.

"Er—hullo," I said.

She did not reply at once. She went on staring. Then: "Is there anyone in sight?" she asked.

I looked up as much of the track as I could see from where I stood, and then up at the opposite hillside.

"I can't see anyone," I told her.

She pushed the bushes aside, and stepped out cautiously, looking this way and that. She was dressed just as she had been when I first saw her—except that her hair had been a trifle raked about by branches. On the rough ground the shoes looked even more inappropriate. Seeming a little reassured, she took a few steps forward.

"I—" she began.

Then, higher up the coombe, a man's voice called, and another answered it. The girl froze for a moment, looking scared.

"They're coming. Hide me somewhere, quickly, please," she said.

"Er—" I began, inadequately.

"Oh, quick, quick. They're coming," she said urgently. She certainly looked alarmed.

"Better come inside," I told her, and led the way into the cottage.

She followed swiftly, and when I had shut the door she slid the bolt.

"Don't let them catch me. Don't let them," she begged.

"Look here, what's all this about. Who are 'they'?" I asked.

She did not answer that; her eyes, roving round the room, found the telephone.

"Call the police," she said. "Call the police, quickly." I hesitated. "Don't you have any police?" she added.

"Of course we have police, but—"

"Then call them, please."

"But look here—" I began.

She clenched her hands.

"You must call them, please. Quickly."

She looked very anxious.

"All right, I'll call them. You can do the explaining," I said, and picked up the instrument.

I was used to the rustic leisure of communications in those parts, and waited patiently. The girl did not; she stood twining her fingers together. At last the connection was made:

"Hullo," I said, "is that the Plyton Police?"

"Plyton Police—" an answering voice had begun when there was an interruption of steps on the gravel path, followed by a heavy knocking at the door. I handed the instrument to the girl and went to the door.

"Don't let them in," she said, and then gave her attention to the telephone.

I hesitated. The rather peremptory knocking came again. One can't just stand about, not letting people in; besides, to take a strange young lady hurriedly into one's cottage, and immediately bolt the door against all comers—? At the third knocking I opened up.

The aspect of the man on my doorstep took me aback. Not his face—that was suitable enough in a young man of, say, twenty-five—it was his clothes. One is not prepared to encounter something that looks like a close-fitting skating-suit, worn with a full-cut, hip-length, glass-buttoned jacket; certainly not on Dartmoor, at the end of the summer season. However, I pulled myself together enough to ask what he wanted. He paid no attention to that as he stood looking over my shoulder at the girl.

"Tavia," he said. "Come here!"

She didn't stop talking hurriedly into the telephone. The man stepped forward.

"Steady on!" I said. "First, I'd like to know what all this is about."

He looked at me squarely.

"You wouldn't understand," he said, and raised his arm to push me out of the way.

I have always felt that I would strongly dislike people who tell me that I don't understand, and try to push me off my

own threshold. I socked him hard in the stomach, and as he doubled up I pushed him outside and closed the door.

"They're coming," said the girl's voice behind me. "The police are coming."

"If you'd just tell me—" I began. But she pointed.

"Look out!—at the window," she said.

I turned. There was another man outside, dressed similarly to the first who was still audibly wheezing on the doorstep. He was hesitating. I reached my twelve-bore off the wall, grabbed some cartridges from the drawer and loaded it. Then I stood back, facing the door.

"Open it, and keep behind it," I told her.

She obeyed, doubtfully.

Outside, the second man was now bending solicitously over the first. A third man was coming up the path. They saw the gun, and we had a brief tableau.

"You, there," I said. "You can either beat it quick, or stay and argue it out with the police. Which is it to be?"

"But you don't understand. It is most important—" began one of them.

"All right. Then you can stay there and tell the police how important it is," I said, and nodded to the girl to close the door again.

We watched through the window as the two of them helped the winded man away.

The police, when they arrived, were not amiable. They took down my description of the men reluctantly, and departed coolly. Meanwhile, there was the girl.

She had told the police as little as she well could—simply that she had been pursued by three oddly dressed men, and had appealed to me for help. She had refused their offer of a lift to Plyton in the police car, so here she still was.

"Well, now," I suggested, "perhaps you'd like to explain to me just what seems to be going on?"

She sat quite still facing me with a long level look which had a tinge of—sadness?—disappointment?—well, unsatisfactoriness of some kind. For a moment I wondered if she were going to cry, but in a small voice she said:

"I had your letter—and now I've burned my boats."

I sat down opposite to her. After fumbling a bit I found my cigarettes and lit one.

"You—er—had my letter, and now you've—er—burnt your boats?" I repeated.

"Yes," she said. Her eyes left mine and strayed round the room, not seeing much.

"And now you don't even know me," she said.

Whereupon the tears came, fast.

I sat there helplessly for a half-minute. Then I decided to go into the kitchen and put on the kettle while she had it out. All my female relatives have always regarded tea as the prime panacea, so I brought the pot and cups back with me when I returned.

I found her recovered, sitting staring pensively at the unlit fire. I put a match to it. She watched it take light and burn, with the expression of a child who has just received a present.

"Lovely," she said, as though a fire were something completely novel. She looked all round the room again. "Lovely," she repeated.

"Would you like to pour?" I suggested, but she shook her head, and watched me do it.

"Tea," she said. "By a fireside!"

Which was true enough, but scarcely remarkable.

"I think it is about time we introduced ourselves," I suggested. "I am Gerald Lattery."

"Of course," she said, nodding. It was not to my mind an altogether appropriate reply, but she followed it up by: "I am Octavia Lattery—they usually call me Tavia."

Tavia?—Something clinked in my mind, but did not quite chime.

"We are related in some way?" I asked her.

"Yes—very distantly," she said, looking at me oddly. "Oh, dear," she added, "this is difficult," and looked as if she were about to cry again.

"Tavia . . ." I repeated, trying to remember. "There's something . . ." Then I had a sudden vision of an embarrassed elderly gentleman. "Why, of course; Now what was the name? Doctor—Doctor Bogey, or something?"

She suddenly sat quite still.

"Not—not Doctor Gobie?" she suggested.

"Yes, that's it. He asked me about somebody called Tavia. That would be you?"

"He isn't here?" she said, looking round as if he might be hiding in a corner.

I told her it would be about two years ago now. She relaxed.

"Silly old Uncle Donald. How like him! And naturally you'd have no idea what he was talking about?"

"I've very little more now," I pointed out, "though I can understand how even an uncle might be agitated at losing you."

"Yes. I'm afraid he will be—very," she said.

"Was: this was two years ago," I reminded her.

"Oh, of course you don't really understand yet, do you?"

"Look," I told her. "One after another, people keep on telling me that I don't understand. I know that already—it is about the only thing I do understand."

"Yes. I'd better explain. Oh dear, where shall I begin?" I let her ponder that, uninterrupted. Presently she said: "Do you believe in predestination?"

"I don't think so," I told her.

"Oh—no, well perhaps it isn't quite that, after all—more like a sort of affinity. You see, ever since I was quite tiny I remember thinking this was the most thrilling and wonderful age—and then, of course, it was the time in which the only famous person in our family lived. So I thought it was marvelous. Romantic, I suppose you'd call it."

"It depends whether you mean the thought or the age—" I began, but she took no notice.

"I used to picture the great fleets of funny little aircraft during the wars, and think how they were like David going out to hit Goliath, so tiny and brave. And there were the huge clumsy ships, wallowing slowly along, but getting there somehow in the end, and nobody minding how slow they were. And quaint, black and white movies; and horses in the streets; and shaky old internal combustion engines; and coal fires; and exciting bombings; and trains running on rails; and telephones with wires; and, oh, lots of things. And the things one could do! Fancy being at the first night of a new show play, or a new Coward play, in a real theater! Or getting

a brand new T. S. Eliot, on publishing day. Or seeing the Queen drive by to open Parliament. A wonderful, thrilling time!"

"Well, it's nice to hear somebody think so," I said. "My own view of the age doesn't quite—"

"Ah, but that's only to be expected. You haven't any perspective on it, so you can't appreciate it. It'd do you good to live in ours for a bit, and see how flat and stale and uniform everything is—so deadly, deadly dull."

I boggled a little: "I don't think I quite—er, live in your what?"

"Century, of course. The Twenty-Second. Oh, of course, you don't know. How silly of me."

I concentrated on pouring out some more tea.

"Oh dear, I knew this was going to be difficult," she remarked. "Do you find it difficult?"

I said I did, rather. She went on with a dogged air:

"Well, you see, feeling like that about it is why I took up history. I mean, I could really *think* myself into history—some of it. And then getting your letter on my birthday was really what made me take the mid-Twentieth Century as my Special Period for my Honors Degree, and, of course, it made up my mind for me to go on and do postgraduate work."

"Er—my letter did all this?"

"Well, that was the only way, wasn't it? I mean there simply wasn't any other way I could have got near a history-machine except by working in a history laboratory, was there? And even then I doubt whether I'd have had a chance to use it on my own if it hadn't been Uncle Donald's lab."

"History-machine," I said, grasping a straw out of all this. "What is a history-machine?"

She looked puzzled.

"It's, well—a history-machine. You learn history with it."

"Not lucid," I said. "You might as well tell me you make history with it."

"Oh, no. One's not supposed to do that. It's a very serious offense."

"Oh," I said. I tried again: "About this letter—"

"Well, I had to bring that in to explain about history, but

you won't have written it yet, of course, so I expect you find it a bit confusing."

"Confusing," I told her, "is scarcely the word. Can't we get hold of something concrete? This letter I'm supposed to have written, for instance. What was it about?"

She looked at me hard, and then away. A most surprising blush swept up her face, and ran into her hair. She made herself look back at me again. I watched her eyes go shiny, and then pucker at the corners. She dropped her face suddenly into her hands.

"Oh, you don't love me, you don't," she wailed. "I wish I'd never come. I wish I was dead!"

"She sort of—sniffed at me," said Tavia.

"Well, she's gone now, and my reputation with her," I said. "An excellent worker, our Mrs. Toombs, but conventional. She'll probably throw up the job."

"Because I'm here? How silly!"

"Perhaps your conventions are different."

"But where else could I go? I've only a few shillings of your kind of money, and nobody to go to."

"Mrs. Toombs could scarcely know that."

"But we weren't, I mean we didn't—"

"Night, and the figure two," I told her, "are plenty for our conventions. In fact, two is enough, anyway. You will recall that the animals simply went in two by two; their emotional relationships didn't interest anyone. Two; and all is assumed."

"Oh, of course, I remember, there was no probative then—now, I mean. You have a sort of rigid, lucky-dip, take-it-or-leave-it system."

"There are other ways of expressing it, but—well, ostensibly at any rate, yes, I suppose."

"Rather crude, these old customs, when one sees them at close range—but fascinating," she remarked. Her eyes rested thoughtfully upon me for a second. "You—" she began.

"You," I reminded her, "promised to give me a more explanatory explanation of all this than you achieved yesterday."

"You didn't believe me."

"The first wallop took my breath," I admitted, "but you've

given me enough evidence since. Nobody could keep up an act like that."

She frowned.

"I don't think that's very kind of you. I've studied the mid-Twentieth very thoroughly. It was my Special Period."

"So you told me, but that doesn't get me far. All historical scholars have Special Periods, but that doesn't mean that they suddenly turn up in them."

She stared at me. "But of course they do—licensed historians. How else would they make close studies?"

"There's too much of this 'of course' business," I told her. "I suggest we just begin at the beginning. Now this letter of mine—no, we'll skip the letter," I added hastily as I caught her expression. "Now, you went to work in your uncle's laboratory with something called a history-machine. What's that—a kind of tape-recorder?"

"Good gracious, no. It's a kind of cupboard thing you get into to go to times and places."

"Oh," I said. "You—you mean you can walk into it in 21something, and walk out into 19something?"

"Or any other past time," she said, nodding. "But, of course, not anybody can do it. You have to be qualified and licensed and all that kind of thing. There are only six permitted history-machines in England, and only about a hundred in the whole world, and they're very strict about them."

"When the first ones were made they didn't realize what trouble they might cause, but after a time historians began to check the trips made against the written records of the periods, and started to find funny things. There was Hero demonstrating a simple steam-turbine at Alexandria sometime B.C.; and Archimedes using a kind of napalm at the siege of Syracuse; and Leonardo da Vinci drawing parachutes when there wasn't anything to parachute from; and Eric the Red discovering America in a sort of off-the-record way before Columbus got there; and Napoleon wondering about submarines; and lots of other suspicious things. So it was clear that some people had been careless when they used the machine, and had been causing chronoclasms."

"Causing—what?"

"Chronoclasms—that's when a thing goes and happens at

the wrong time because somebody was careless, or talked rashly.

"Well, most of those things had happened without causing very much harm—as far as we can tell—though it is possible that the natural course of history was altered several times, and people write very clever papers to show how. But everybody saw that the results might be extremely dangerous. Just suppose that somebody had carelessly given Napoleon the idea of the internal combustion engine to add to the idea of the submarine; there's no telling what would have happened. So they decided that tampering must be stopped at once, and all history-machines were forbidden except those licensed by the Historians' Council."

"Just hold it a minute," I said. "Look, if a thing is done, it's done. I mean, well, for example, I am here. I couldn't suddenly cease to be, or to have been, if somebody were to go back and kill my grandfather when he was a boy."

"But you certainly couldn't be here if they did, could you?" she asked. "No, the fallacy that the past is unchangeable didn't matter a bit as long as there was no means of changing it, but once there was, and the fallacy of the idea was shown, we had to be very careful indeed. That's what a historian has to worry about; the other side—just how it happens—we leave to the higher-mathematicians."

"Now, before you are allowed to use the history-machine you have to have special courses, tests, permits, and give solemn undertakings, and then do several years on probation before you get your license to practice. Only then are you allowed to visit and observe on your own. And that is all you may do, observe. The rule is very, very strict."

I thought that over. "If it isn't an unkind question—aren't you breaking rather a lot of these rules every minute?" I suggested.

"Of course I am. That's why they came after me," she said.

"You'd have had your license revoked, or something, if they'd caught you?"

"Good gracious. I could never qualify for a license. I've just sneaked my trips when the lab has been empty sometimes. It being Uncle Donald's lab made things easier because unless

I was actually caught at the machine, I could always pretend I was doing something special for him.

"I had to have the right clothes to come in, but I dared not go to the historians' regular costume-makers, so I sketched some things in a museum and got them copied—they're all right, aren't they?"

"Very successful, and becoming, too," I assured her. "—Though there is a little something about the shoes."

She looked down at her feet. "I was afraid so. I couldn't find any of quite the right date," she admitted. "Well, then," she went on, "I was able to make a few short trial trips. They had to be short because duration is constant—that is, an hour here is the same as an hour there—and I couldn't get the machine to myself for long at a time. But yesterday a man came into the lab just as I was getting back. When he saw these clothes he knew at once what I was doing, so the only thing I could do was to jump straight back into the machine—I'd never have had another chance. And they came after me without even bothering to change."

"Do you think they'll come again?" I asked her.

"I expect so. But they'll be wearing proper clothes for the period next time."

"Are they likely to be desperate? I mean, would they shoot, or anything like that?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. That'd be a pretty bad chronoclasm—particularly if they happened to kill somebody."

"But you being here must be setting up a series of pretty resounding chronoclasm. Which would be worse?"

"Oh, mine are all accounted for. I looked it up," she assured me, obscurely. "They'll be less worried about me when they've thought of looking it up, too."

She paused briefly. Then, with an air of turning to a more interesting subject, she went on:

"When people in your time get married they have to dress up in a special way for it, don't they?"

The topic seemed to have a fascination for her.

"M'm," mumbled Tavia. "I think I rather like Twentieth Century marriage."

"It has risen higher in my own estimation, darling," I ad-

mitted. And, indeed, I was quite surprised to find how much higher it had risen in the course of the last month or so.

"Do Twentieth Century marrieds always have one big bed, darling?" she inquired.

"Invariably, darling," I assured her.

"Funny," she said. "Not very hygienic, of course, but quite nice all the same."

We reflected on that.

"Darling, have you noticed she doesn't sniff at me any more?" she remarked.

"We always cease to sniff on production of a certificate, darling," I explained.

Conversation pursued its desultory way on topics of personal, but limited, interest for a while. Eventually it reached a point where I was saying:

"It begins to look as if we don't need to worry any more about those men who were chasing you, darling. They'd have been back long before now if they had been as worried as you thought."

She shook her head.

"We'll have to go on being careful, but it is queer. Something to do with Uncle Donald, I expect. He's not really mechanically minded, poor dear. Well, you can tell that by the way he set the machine two years wrong when he came to see you. But there's nothing we can do except wait, and be careful."

I went on reflecting. Presently:

"I shall have to get a job soon. That may make it difficult to keep a watch for them," I told her.

"Job?" she said.

"In spite of what they say, two can't live as cheap as one. And wives hanker after certain standards, and ought to have them—within reason, of course. The little money I have won't run to them."

"You don't need to worry about that, darling," Tavia assured me. "You can just invent something."

"Me? Invent?" I exclaimed.

"Yes. You're already fairly well up on radio, aren't you?"

"They put me on a few radar courses when I was in the R.A.F."

"Ah! The R.A.F.!" she said, ecstatically. "To think that you actually fought in the Second Great War! Did you know Monty and Ike and all those wonderful people?"

"Not personally. Different arm of the Services," I said.

"What a pity, everyone liked Ike. But about the other thing. All you have to do is to get some advanced radio and electronics books, and I'll show you what to invent."

"You'll—? Oh, I see. But do you think that would be quite ethical?" I asked, doubtfully.

"I don't see why not. After all the things have got to be invented by somebody, or I couldn't have learnt about them at school, could I?"

"I—er, I think I'll have to think a bit about that," I told her.

It was, I suppose, coincidence that I should have mentioned the lack of interruption that particular morning—at least, it may have been: I have become increasingly suspicious of coincidences since I first saw Tavia. At any rate, in the middle of that same morning Tavia, looking out of the window, said:

"Darling, there's somebody waving from the trees over there."

I went over to have a look, and sure enough I had a view of a stick with a white handkerchief tied to it, swinging slowly from side to side. Through field-glasses I was able to distinguish the operator, an elderly man almost hidden in the bushes. I handed the glasses to Tavia.

"Oh, dear! Uncle Donald," she exclaimed. "I suppose we had better see him. He seems to be alone."

I went outside, down to the end of my path, and waved him forward. Presently he emerged, carrying the stick and handkerchief bannerwise. His voice reached me faintly: "Don't shoot!"

I spread my hand wide to show that I was unarmed. Tavia came down the path and stood beside me. As he drew close, he transferred the stick to his left hand, lifted his hat with the other, and inclined his head politely.

"Ah, Sir Gerald! A pleasure to meet you again," he said.

"He isn't Sir Gerald, Uncle. He's Mr. Lattery," said Tavia.

"Dear me. Stupid of me. Mr. Lattery," he went on, "I am

sure you'll be glad to hear that the wound was more uncomfortable than serious. Just a matter of the poor fellow having to lie on his front for a while."

"Poor fellow—?" I repeated, blankly.

"The one you shot yesterday."

"I shot?"

"Probably tomorrow or the next day," Tavia said, briskly. "Uncle, you really are dreadful with those settings, you know."

"I understand the principles well enough, my dear. It's just the operation that I sometimes find a little confusing."

"Never mind. Now you are here you'd better come indoors," she told him. "And you can put that handkerchief away in your pocket," she added.

As he entered I saw him give a quick glance round the room, and nod to himself as if satisfied with the authenticity of its contents. We sat down. Tavia said:

"Just before we go any further, Uncle Donald, I think you ought to know that I am married to Gerald—Mr. Lattery."

Dr. Gobie peered closely at her.

"Married?" he repeated. "What for?"

"Oh, dear," said Tavia. She explained patiently: "I am in love with him, and he's in love with me, so I am his wife. It's the way things happen here."

"Tch, tch!" said Dr. Gobie, and shook his head. "Of course I am well aware of your sentimental penchant for the Twentieth Century and its ways, my dear, but surely it wasn't quite necessary for you to—er—go native?"

"I like it, quite a lot," Tavia told him.

"Young women will be romantic, I know. But have you thought of the trouble you will be causing Sir Ger—er, Mr. Lattery?"

"But I'm saving him trouble, Uncle Donald. They sniff at you here if you don't get married, and I didn't like him being sniffed at."

"I wasn't thinking so much of while you're here, as of after you have left. They have a great many rules about presuming death, and proving desertion, and so on; most dilatory and complex. Meanwhile, he can't marry anyone else."

"I'm sure he wouldn't want to marry anyone else, would you darling?" she said to me.

"Certainly not," I protested.

"You're quite sure of that, darling?"

"Darling," I said, taking her hand, "if all the other women in the world—"

After a time Dr. Gobie recalled our attention with an apologetic cough.

"The real purpose of my visit," he explained, "is to persuade my niece that she *must* come back, and at once. There is the greatest consternation and alarm throughout the faculty over this affair, and I am being held largely to blame. Our chief anxiety is to get her back before any serious damage is done. Any chronoclasm goes ringing unendingly down the ages—and at any moment a really serious one may come of this escapade. It has put all of us into a highly nervous condition."

"I'm sorry about that, Uncle Donald—and about your getting the blame. But I am not coming back. I'm very happy here."

"But the possible chronoclasm, my dear. It keeps me awake at night thinking—"

"Uncle dear, they'd be nothing to the chronoclasm that would happen if I did come back just now. You must see that I simply can't, and explain it to the others."

"Can't—?" he repeated.

"Now, if you look in the books you'll see that my husband—isn't that a funny, ugly old-fashioned word? I rather like it, though. It comes from two ancient Icelandic roots—"

"You were speaking about not coming back," Dr. Gobie reminded her.

"Oh, yes. Well, you'll see in the books that first he invented submarine radio communication, and then later on he invented curved-beam transmission, which is what he got knighted for."

"I'm perfectly well aware of that, Tavia. I do not see—"

"But, Uncle Donald, you must. How on earth can he possibly invent those things if I'm not here to show him how to do it? If you take me away now, they'll just not be invented, and then what will happen?"

Dr. Gobie stared at her steadily for some moments.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I must admit that that point had not

occurred to me," and sank deeply into thought for a while.

"Besides," Tavia added, "Gerald would hate me to go, wouldn't you darling?"

"I—" I began, but Dr. Gobie cut me short by standing up.

"Yes," he said. "I can see there will have to be a postponement for a while. I shall put your point to them, but it will be only for a while."

On his way to the door he paused.

"Meanwhile, my dear, do be careful. These things are so delicate and complicated. I tremble to think of the complexities you might set up if you—well, say, if you were to do something irresponsible like becoming your own progenetrix."

"That is one thing I can't do, Uncle Donald. I'm on the collateral branch."

"Oh, yes. Yes, that's a very lucky thing. Then I'll say au revoir, my dear, and to you, too, Sir—er—Mr. Lattery. I trust that we may meet again—it has had its pleasant side to be here as more than a mere observer for once."

"Uncle Donald, you've said a mouthful there," Tavia agreed.

He shook his head reprovingly at her.

"I'm afraid you would never have got to the top of the historical tree, my dear. You aren't thorough enough. That phrase is early Twentieth Century, and, if I may say so, inelegant even then."

The expected shooting incident took place about a week later. Three men, dressed in quite convincing imitation of farmhands, made the approach. Tavia recognized one of them through the glasses. When I appeared, gun in hand, at the door, they tried to make for cover. I peppered one at considerable range, and he ran on, limping.

After that we were left unmolested. A little later we began to get down to the business of underwater radio—surprisingly simple, once the principle had been pointed out—and I filed my applications for patents. With that well in hand, we turned to the curved-beam transmission.

Tavia hurried me along with that. She said:

"You see, I don't know how long we've got, darling. I've been trying to remember ever since I got here what the date

was on your letter, and I can't—even though I remember you underlined it. I know there's a record that your first wife deserted you—'deserted,' isn't that a dreadful word to use: as if I would, my sweet—but it doesn't say when. So I must get you properly briefed on this because there'd be the most frightful chronoclasm if you failed to invent it."

And then, instead of buckling down to it as her words suggested, she became pensive.

"As a matter of fact," she said, "I think there's going to be a pretty bad chronoclasm anyway. You see, I'm going to have a baby."

"No!" I exclaimed delightedly.

"What do you mean, 'no'? I am. And I'm worried. I don't think it has ever happened to a traveling historian before. Uncle Donald would be terribly annoyed if he knew."

"To hell with Uncle Donald," I said. "And to hell with chronoclasms. We're going to celebrate, darling."

The weeks slid quickly by. My patents were granted provisionally. I got a good grip on the theory of curved-beam transmission. Everything was going nicely. We discussed the future: whether he was to be called Donald, or whether she was going to be called Alexandra. How soon the royalties would begin to come in so that we could make an offer for Bagford House. How funny it would feel at first to be addressed as Lady Lattery, and other allied themes . . .

And then came that December afternoon when I got back from discussing a modification with a manufacturer in London and found that she wasn't there any more . . .

Not a note, not a last word. Just the open front door, and a chair overturned in the sitting room . . .

Oh, Tavia, my dear . . .

I began to write this down because I still have an uneasy feeling about the ethics of not being the inventor of my inventions, and that there should be a straightening out. Now that I have reached the end, I perceive that "straightening out" is scarcely an appropriate description of it. In fact, I can foresee so much trouble attached to putting this forward as a conscientious reason for refusing a knighthood, that I think I shall say nothing, and just accept the knighthood

when it comes. After all, when I consider a number of "inspired" inventions that I can call to mind, I begin to wonder whether certain others have not done that before me.

I have never pretended to understand the finer points of action and interaction comprehended in this matter, but I have a pressing sense that one action now on my part is basically necessary: not just to avoid dropping an almighty chronoclast myself, but for fear that if I neglect it I may find that the whole thing never happened. So I must write a letter.

First, the envelope:

To my great, great grandniece,

Miss Octavia Lattery.

(To be opened by her on her 21st birthday.

6th June 2136.)

Then the letter. Date it. Underline the date.

My sweet, far-off, lovely Tavia,

Oh, my darling . . .