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COVER BY ROGERS

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The Probable Man

By Alfred Bester

*There was no certainty left for him
but one—he could never go home!*

Illustrated by Kramer

The black car drew alongside, then swerved in front of their roadster. Brakes squealed. David Conn kicked the door open, shouldered

the heavy rucksack and grabbed Hilda's wrist.

"Come on!" he said.

The gloom of late afternoon low-

ered as they ran panting across the fields. Conn saw the grass alongside whip, and a fraction of a second later heard the crack of a gun sounding from behind. Hilda gasped.

"They mean business," Conn said.

He twisted his head as they ran. Shapes followed them through the dusk. Five—six—seven. If only he could find cover. But they were running across a broad open lawn that looked like a fairway. Two hundred yards to the left he saw the jet outline of bunkers; a green topped by a fluttering flag.

"This way!" Conn grunted.

Shots sounded again, sharp and clear in the April evening as they tumbled over the edge of the bunker down into a soft sand pit. Conn got the rucksack off his shoulder, turned and squirmed up the side of the pit, facing their pursuers. He slid his gun out and fired at a dim shape. Hilda came up alongside to watch.

"Get down," said Conn. "They want you."

"Alive," said Hilda, "not dead. I won't be any good to them, dead."

"I will," said Conn.

He tried to catch his breath. Beyond pistol range the seven black figures closed to a tight group and consulted. Conn counted cartridges. Two clips. Twelve. It wouldn't be enough. They would wait until it grew a little darker and then rush. He couldn't afford to lose time. He had to get to the machine by eight—and that gave him less than an hour to fight and win an impossible battle.

"Save a bullet for me," said Hilda.

Conn looked at her quickly. The soft blond hair and blue eyes. This, he thought, is downright weird. I fall in love with a girl who died a thousand years before I was born. I look at her full lovely mouth and I

want to kiss it, and all the time I know her mouth has been dust and ashes for a thousand years.

"That's stupid talk," Conn said. "You don't know what I can do."

"Maybe you don't know what Nazis can do," Hilda answered. "They'll take me back to Holland. They'll use me for political blackmail. They'll keep me locked up—like Leopold of Belgium. Save a bullet."

The seven forms were still consulting. Conn knew what their big problem was. They were wondering how to avoid killing Hilda in the attack. It was getting black rapidly. Conn sent two slugs their way just to let them know. Then he stole another glance at Hilda. She smiled tremulously.

"I'm thinking that you're beautiful," Conn said.

"You're thinking how sorry you are you ever got mixed up with a refugee," Hilda answered. "You're wishing Prime Minister Pietjen never had a daughter—"

"No," Conn said. He was beginning to lose control of himself at the thought of anyone wanting to hurt Hilda. "It just occurred to me that a thousand years ago our name might have been Cohen. It makes me want to shoot straight."

"A thousand years?" Hilda stared.

"Listen," Conn said. "I haven't had the heart to tell you. I was waiting until the last minute—until I reached the place I'm headed for, up the side of that slope there. Can you guess what I meant when I said—a thousand years?"

"No." Hilda shook her head. "It sounds crazy to me. All I know is that you were in a hurry to get some place when they cut us off. You told me last month you were a reporter from the West coast—"

"Reporter is right, but not from

the coast—" Conn fingered the revolver nervously. "Maybe you won't believe this—"

Hilda nudged his elbow. The forms had separated. He could barely see them. Through the hush of nightfall, he heard the faint squeaks of shoes on dewy grass. Conn waited while his heart thumped.

They would rush from all sides, he thought, and in the night he might get one or two at the most. Then the rest would pick up Hilda. She'd be bound and gagged, and in a month she'd be back in Holland. She wouldn't be his Hilda any more. She'd be Hilda Pietjen, daughter of the prime minister, just another chip in the Nazi poker game. And he'd be dead in the bunker, a thousand years before he'd been born.

A SPIKE of red flame flared and cracked. Conn fired at the flash. It had been a signal. Feet thumped on the turf. Conn thought: What have I got to lose? He got to his knees and scrambled to the lip of the trap, exposing himself. He fired the last shots carefully at the looming shapes, and as the echoes boomed, he rolled down into the pit, fingers groping for the last clip. It seemed to him that floodlights were sparking around him.

A black figure hurtled over the bunker and came down at him. Conn dropped the clip and smashed his empty gun in the man's face. At that moment a second caught him on the flank and bore him down. Grit seared Conn's cheek. He rolled with flailing arms and drove an elbow into the man's neck.

He tried to get to his feet in the shifting sand. The man kicked him heavily in the belly. Conn fell forward, fists pumping toward the jaw. His knuckles glanced across the

man's nose. Cartilage squished and the man groaned and slumped. Then Conn's right drove against the jaw. Everything was still.

"No more?" Conn croaked. Hilda helped him up, her eyes distended with fright. Conn repeated: "No more? There ought to be. I couldn't have killed five men with two shots." He examined the surrounding fairway closely. In the glow of the rising moon he saw nothing. The turf looked torn.

"No more," Hilda said. "Oh, darling, I—"

Conn took her in his arms and kissed her. This, he thought, ought to be the last paragraph. Nothing else comes after this but "They lived happily ever after" and then "The End." He nestled his bruised cheek against her silky hair and tried to memorize its scent. At last he pushed Hilda gently away.

"I've got to go now," Conn said. "It's nearing night. This is good-bye, Hilda, for a long time. Maybe forever—"

Even in the darkness he could sense the way Hilda stiffened. She stepped back a little, her hand raised to her lips.

"Oh—" she said.

Conn said: "It's not what you think, darling. I love you, but—" Too overwrought to continue, he hunted shakily for his revolver and clip, found them at last and tried to brush out the sand.

"I think we'd better go back to the car," Hilda said.

"No, I'll walk the rest of the way," said Conn. "It's not far to where I'm going—in a sense." He shouldered the heavy rucksack, paused for a instant. Suddenly he grasped Hilda's arms and shook her a little. "You've got to understand," he said. "This is something I must do. I'm

not a free agent— I've got a tremendous responsibility."

"Don't talk," Hilda said. "Excuses don't make it any easier to understand."

"You're not making it any easier," Conn said.

Hilda broke away from him and tried to struggle up the side of the sand pit. Conn helped her up. They stood on the open fairway, feeling the night breeze cool their faces.

"Listen to me a moment," Conn said. He pulled out the keys of his roadster and handed them to her. "This is for the car. It's yours now. I won't be needing it, ever again. Hilda, this isn't the way I wanted to say good-by. I thought we'd drive to the place and I'd explain there. The apparatus would have made understanding easier for you. Maybe this way is better after all. We'll part here. You'll drive back to the city, hating me. Pretty soon you'll forget—"

She took the keys in silence, eying him contemptuously. Suddenly Hilda slapped his face. The blow stung. Conn grinned wryly.

"All right," he said. "Good-by—"

He started toward the hill where the machine was cased. After a dozen steps he turned his head and dimly saw Hilda standing there in the night. After a dozen more he heard her cry: "David!" And then again in an altered, almost joyous tone: "David!" He thought that a wind brushed past him, like the ghost of himself returning to Hilda.

He wanted to go back to her more than anything else. He thought: To hell with Dunbar and my responsibility to him. To hell with the machine—let it rot forever. To hell with everything but Hilda— But it was twenty minutes to eight and the discipline was bred strong in him. He pushed into the high weeds at

the foot of the hill and began to mount the slope.

Every step pushed this pleasant land farther into the past. His own day loomed before him—the day a thousand years to come. The same earth, but a place of towering cities, of giant laboratories; of vast engines that reshaped the land and thundering rocketships that pierced the skies.

Conn thought of the ordered existence to which he was returning and sighed. It was tailored. Life was too smooth and easy. There was too little work, no excitement; too little adventure, no danger. In this crude earth of the past which he was leaving he had found all the breathlessness for which he'd yearned. He'd found and left a girl crying out for him, a girl whose cries had died away a thousand years ago.

CONN REACHED the crest of the hill. The core was of solid granite, as old as eternity; Dunbar had made sure of that. Conn probed carefully in the turf until he found the soft spot. He dug energetically until he uncovered the bank of studs. He pressed them in combination and stood up.

Slowly a yard-wide circle of turf slipped downward, carrying him with it. Fifty feet it lowered until a narrow steel door set flush in the side of the shaft slipped up before Conn. He thrust it open, stepped inside and pressed a button placed high on the jamb. The circle of turf ascended again.

Conn shut the door behind him and switched on the lights. The apparatus glittered before him, a maze of solenoids and selenium generators, as gleaming and new as though Dunbar had assembled it half an hour before. He glanced at his wrist watch. Five minutes to eight. Dunbar had given him strict instructions

to return within a year at the utmost. Power had drained off from the banks of accumulators through sheer inactivity. This way there was just enough left. Another day's delay might make return impossible.

Hastily Conn inspected the written records and samples he had packed into the rucksack. Underneath these were the tinned reels of motion pictures he had shot. He shouldered the sack, checked instruments and at last stepped up on the small platform in the center of the apparatus. He reached out for the giant knife-switch.

He thought: I'm a fool. Here's where I belong. Hilda needs me. Just because we've fought off one group of Nazi agents doesn't mean she'll be safe forever.

He thought: What am I getting excited about Nazis for? This is all past and forgotten. Democracy will survive. The last vestiges of Fascism died out in 1970. That will be twenty-nine years from this moment. Hilda will be fifty. Maybe she'll be married with children and grandchildren. Maybe sometimes she'll think about the "reporter" she met New Year's Eve 1941. Maybe she'll think of the way he ditched her.

He thought: I don't belong in the dead world of the past. Why don't I cheer up? I'm going back to my own family and friends. I belong in 2941. Dunbar's waiting for me to make my report.

It was eight o'clock. He yanked down the switch, and as the machine roared he said: "Damn!"

II.

A THOUSAND YEARS through time took less than five seconds. Conn stood impatiently on the platform, waiting for the last emanations to

die away from the tube. The solenoids still whined in dying sighs like the final whispers of a siren. Some of the contacts sputtered and violet light played in the slow turning generators. That was all. All that was left of the surge of power that had thrust him a thousand years forward through the Time Stream.

Conn stepped down and glanced at the accumulator index. The needle hung over the red exhaustion mark. He'd had barely enough power. He walked wearily to the door and yanked the heavy steel plate open.

Conn pressed the stud again and presently the circular plate dropped down. He could make out the crescent of pale light aloft. That would be old Dunbar's laboratory, built at the crest of this century-old granite outcropping. Dunbar would probably be there, pacing the marble floor in anxiety. He'd been pacing maybe five minutes since the time Conn had started out. Conn remembered the vastness of the laboratory. The gleaming walls and lofty ceiling.

He would say hello to Dunbar first. Then, before anything else, he would step out on the balcony and look east to where the golf course had been, and farther to where the Merrick Highway had wound its silver thread toward New York. Now there would be nothing but the inane regularity of masses of mile-high buildings. No—there was no more green land and forest in his time. Only mile after endless mile of towering steel and marble buildings, and perhaps, here and there, a carefully planned little garden.

The disk shuddered to a halt before him. Conn stepped forward, then gasped. It was not topped with the gleaming gray marbelite of Dun-

bar's lab floor. It was covered with a brown rubble. Rubble chinked with dirt; and in that brown moist earth grew sparse blades of grass. Conn looked up, bewildered. The light from overhead was still pale. In that circle he saw a sprinkling of stars.

He started the disk and arose in an agony of wonder. In choked tones he called: "Dunbar?" and then: "Dunbar! This is Conn!" There was no answer. Only the creaking whisper of the lift mechanism.

It was not too dark. A full moon rode overhead. To the north there was a heavy black forest. East and south were rolling hills showing patches of naked rock and moon glints on a vast broad river. West stretched shimmering wheat fields, and a mile beyond them Conn discerned the silhouette of towering battlements pierced with amber lights.

What had happened to his world?

Conn fingered the sack of records. He thought: There can't be any mistake. Dunbar tested and retested the apparatus. It was set for April, 2941, and if it was set that way, then that's the time I'm in. What's happened to my world?

Ten feet to one side of him, a boulder jerked silently into the air and settled in a cloud of dust. Conn swiveled and stared, oblivious of the hail of cutting particles that slashed his face. As a second rock, a little closer, leaped up, he threw himself down and shielded his head. This time the fragments bit through his clothes like small knives.

Below him, completely encircling the hill, he saw the minute flashes of explosions. It was as though the hill were ringed with enormous fire-flies. But these weren't explosions. There was no sound. He could feel the slight concussions and dimly he

made out the craters that opened up magically under the flashes, but there was no sound.

CONN SQUINTED through the dark. A silent battle seemed to be raging around the foot of the hill. As his eyes accommodated to the gloom, he saw below him two figures partially concealed in a mass of boulders. They were big men incased in plate armor that gleamed in the moonlight. Lying prone, they held ten-foot lances to their shoulders, like rifles. Behind them, lying quietly, were two horses. Conn heard them snort softly and clash their bits.

Surrounding the besieged men was a fitting horde of animallike figures. They were men, but they looked more like enormous furry rabbits. They, too, carried the lances, and Conn saw them continually drop to one knee, throw up the lances and fire. Evidently these were the weapons that were producing the flickering silent explosions.

The horde of rabbitmen milled around the besieged pair with lightning speed, never advancing closer than fifty yards. Conn felt his pulse quicken for the gallant stand those two men were making. He watched breathlessly as they coolly waited for the attackers to come in, then raised slightly and fired. He heard no reports, but he saw the quick hail of craters.

A high whistle sounded. The attackers paused. Conn knew it was the preamble to a final assault, and he knew the men in armor would surely be borne under. With quick fingers he shook the final particles of sand from his revolver and slipped in the last clip.

A second whistle sounded as he hurled himself down the hill, rucksack banging against his hips. He gathered momentum and sprinted

as the rabbitmen came forward toward the boulders in a solid wave. He had a glimpse of the armored men standing upright, pumping their lances, then he had steadied himself and began to fire.

At the first shot a rabbitman screamed and dropped. The others skidded to a halt and Conn saw white flashes as they turned their faces toward the sound of his gunfire. He shouted in exultation and the hills boomed back as his gun spat twice. Two more rabbitmen slumped. Conn heard their lances clatter on the stones.

"Go on, big boys, I'm with you!" Conn shouted. But the two men stood, paralyzed by the sight. Conn fired three times, slowly, deliberately. At each shot another figure fell. By the third, the rabbitmen screamed in terror and fled. Conn jogged down the slope. When he had reached the men in armor, the attackers had faded into the darkness.

"Lucky for you I happened by," Conn said. Through the milky gloom he saw they were dead ringers for the Knights of the Round Table. Only they had removed the steel visors from the helmets and replaced them with heavy crystal.

"Lucky for you," Conn repeated. He was annoyed at the way they kept their lances trained on him. "What's the matter, boys, didn't I do enough for you?"

One laughed abruptly. It sounded hoarse and a little harsh to Conn. "Drop your lance, Schiller," he said. "The man is no Reader."

"Then where is his armor?" the man named Schiller demanded. He kept his strong, heavy face on Conn. "Are you a Swast?" he asked.

"Look, friend," Conn said. "I'm a stranger here. I don't know anything about Swasts or Readers. I just happened by and helped you

out. The least I expect is a thank you."

"Of course," said the first man. He laughed again. "We are all suspicious these days, but Schiller here carries it too far. My thanks go to any man who would kill six of the Reader rats." He thrust forth a gauntleted hand. "Give you thanks, stranger. My name is Horst."

"The name is David Conn." Conn took the proffered hand and shook it. Horst jogged his companion's elbow.

"Come, come, Schiller," he said. "No words for a man who saved you from being flayed alive?"

"Aye, my thanks," Schiller said gruffly. He did not offer his hand. Instead he turned and brought the two horses to their feet. Conn watched him doubtfully as the man mounted and turned his horse toward the castle beyond the wheat fields.

HORST TOOK his horse's reins over his arm and walked alongside Conn as they started after Schiller. They trudged along a narrow dirt road that snaked through the high wheat.

"Schiller," said Horst, "is nervous. The Readers have been pressing us hard—very hard. He's anxious to get back to the castle. That's the only place where a Swast can feel safe these days."

"That so?" Conn said.

"They're like rats, those Readers," Horst went on. "They swarm everywhere. Now they've even begun threatening the castle. If that falls, I don't know what we'll do." He shook his head. "It's the last stronghold."

Conn said: "That's tough!" His mind was churning in bewilderment. Now that the first excitement of the fight was over he had begun to wonder again. He put the empty gun

back in his pocket and tried to puzzle things out. What had happened to his earth? Who were these Swasts and Readers?

"Every man counts, these days," said Horst. "The castle could ill afford to lose two fighting men, and we're glad to get another volunteer. You're the first Swast to get through to us in three years. I don't think there are any more left in America."

"I guess not," Conn said. "Who were the Swasts? Why weren't there any more left in America?"

"What kind of lance did you use back there?" It was Schiller up ahead. He had suddenly turned on his horse and was eyeing Conn again. "Never saw a lance that made so much noise."

"It wasn't a lance," Conn answered. "It's a gun."

"Gun!" exclaimed Horst eagerly. "You mean the old kind? The ancient explosion kind? Where did you get it. Let's see it!"

Conn thought for a moment. He stared at the high wheat around them and wondered how much he could tell these men. He thought he'd best look around a little before he showed his hand.

"I'll show you when we get to the castle," he said.

Schiller reined in his horse so abruptly that he bit cut the animal's mouth.

"Why so anxious to get to the castle?" he demanded.

"I'm not," said Conn. "I'd just like to get there and—"

"You see?" Schiller shot at Horst. The latter paused and nodded.

"Maybe we'd better look him over," he said. His voice regained its harsh quality. "I'd like to see that gun. And I'd like to look into that sack on your shoulder. The Readers are cunning. They could well afford to sacrifice six men to

get a spy into the castle."

Conn looked at them. Schiller had already taken his lance from its boot. It was lying across his saddle, muzzle pointed at him. Conn took out the empty revolver.

"Here," he said. "Look it over."

Horst examined the revolver curiously, then slipped it into his saddle bag. He reached out hands for the rucksack. Without removing the strap from his shoulder, Conn held up the bag with flap turned back to reveal the contents.

"This is a hell of a thing," he said angrily. "How many men do I have to kill for a passport? I'm no spy. No Reader."

"Books!" Horst snarled. He held up a small bound volume of Conn's records for Schiller to see. "Books! The swine's a Reader!"

Schiller cursed and raised his lance. Conn snatched the volume out of Horst's hands and with the same sweep smacked it sharply against the neck of Schiller's horse. The animal reared, snorting with pain. Schiller's shot blasted a silent crater down the road. He cursed again and yanked at the reins.

Conn swerved from under the horse's hoofs and brought his knee up into Horst's stomach. The armor bruised him, but Horst grunted and doubled over. Conn clutched the rucksack in both arms and sprinted off the road into the wheat. Schiller shouted. Abruptly a flare of light appeared in the wheat alongside Conn. A crater opened out like a flower and the night was filled with flying razor particles.

Behind him he heard the clapping thunder of hoofs as Schiller and Horst followed him. He bent low and prayed the high stems would conceal him. Pushing through the wheat was like running through molasses. His breath came in heaves.

He veered and doubled his tracks. The horses were charging up on him swiftly. Conn was filled with a sickening sense of dismay. As the silent explosions continued to flare around him he felt like a blind man running in the unknown.

Horst shouted: "There he goes!" and his voice was dangerously close.

Conn prayed as he ran.

A cross-fire of explosions burst at his toes. As Conn threw his hands up to seared eyes and plunged forward, the ground underneath him gave way. He shot under and crashed in a mass of wheat stems and earth. Dazed, he struggled up from the debris and was horribly aware of furry figures around him, closing in. A multitude of hands seized him.

A voice said: "One sound out of you—"

Conn nodded.

III.

THE SEARCHERS continued to shout. As their horses milled, Conn felt the concussion of hoofs on the earth. Little dribblets of dirt trickled down. In the dark he heard the tense breathing of the men around him.

"Too close to the surface!" one whispered. "I warned you. There was less than five feet between the apex of the shaft and the surface."

"Shoring," came the answer. "It would have been all right if we could have got the timbers in place. Not enough time!"

"Anyway," whispered a third, "who'd of thought the damned Swasts would go blasting in their wheat fields? 'Twas the blast that broke through. The blast and this!" He shook Conn.

Dirt trickled down Conn's neck. He was afraid to brush it away. Then someone gasped, and the grip

on his arm tightened. Hoofs were punching the ground above them, and cascades of earth and stones began to thud down. Conn heard Schiller cursing his horse. He could even hear the heavy panting of the animals and the creak of leather harness. If one of those horses fell through—

"We've got to get back!" came a whisper. "We can't just stand here and wait for hell to break! We'll be crushed—"

Conn stared. Overhead was the four-foot hole the explosion had made and through which he'd fallen. It looked as though he was standing at the pit of a fifteen-foot crater with a narrow mouth. Like an upside-down funnel. On either side of him what had been the shaft was choked solid with earth. More was still dropping, packing still more tightly around them.

"How are we going to get back?" The speaker gazed up anxiously. "Once the Swasts sight us they can shoot us down like rats. We haven't even got lances to make a fight of it."

"Get back? We'll dig, of course."

"Through the debris? It'll take hours."

"Not through the debris!" The speaker tapped the hard floor impatiently. "We'll dig under. Three-level-twenty crosses under here. Less than three feet down. Dig, man, dig!"

The man who had spoken yanked Conn to one side. The other two immediately began to sink their picks into the earth. The hard surface turned over slowly. At last the softer earth began to come up. They dropped their picks and shoveled furiously.

Overhead Conn heard Schiller growl in the distance: "Gone back to one of his rat holes. Keep your

eyes on the ground, Horst. Maybe we can spot the entrance."

Horst cursed faintly. "I'm a fool!" he said. "I might have suspected. But who could know they'd kill six men for the sake of a ruse? Dismount, Schiller. We can beat through on foot!"

One of the diggers exclaimed. "Timber!" he whispered. "I've struck the overhead beams—"

"Dig to one side, then, and make it fast!"

The earth flew. Conn saw a small hole widen. He could hear the sounds of earth dropping down to the lower tunnel. Then the tools were tumbled through. They clanked as they landed.

"Big enough!" gasped the digger. "Let's go!"

He dropped his legs and squirmed until his torso slipped under. A moment later he landed. The second man disappeared. The man who held him pushed Conn toward the hole. As Conn squirmed down, he bruised his hip on the timber alongside. He gripped the timber and dropped.

Schiller's voice was close. He yelled: "Horst! Here! Down in this pit!"

As Conn landed hands yanked him out of the way. A pair of legs spurted through the tunnel head. Horst and Schiller were shouting. The men alongside him seized the legs and pulled down violently. The earth trembled and there was a flare of light as Horst and Schiller began firing. More earth began to drop. Timbers creaked ominously.

"Quick!" said the third man. "They've blasted this shaft, too. It won't hold up another second."

The tunnel was black. It was narrow, Conn felt, and just high enough for a man to crouch and run. As they sprinted down its length,

Conn blundered against the heavy beams set in the walls. The concussion dazed him. He reeled and the man behind him stumbled on his heels. There was a whispered curse and the party halted.

"No use," said the man who was evidently the leader. "*He* don't know the tunnel. We'll have to carry him. Lay down!"

Conn stretched out on the shaft floor. Instantly his ankles and shoulders were gripped and he felt himself being lifted.

"Now!" whispered the leader.

THEY started off again. Conn swayed like a hammock. He clutched his rucksack with both arms and sickened at the headlong flight through darkness. He winced at each sway, anticipating another violent collision with the wall beams. Far behind them he felt rather than heard the thundering fall of earth. That, he thought, would be the cave-in caused by the Swasts' shots.

Suddenly there was light. The party stopped and dumped Conn down. He got to his feet painfully and saw they were at a fork in the tunnel. Two branches were before them, both broad and high. Spaced at ten-foot intervals overhead were tiny spots of luminescence.

"Right or left?" asked the man who carried the tools.

"Left," the leader said. "We've got to take this fella to Rollins and make our report. Besides, something has to be done about the cave-in."

They hustled Conn down the left tunnel at a brisk pace. Gradually it dipped lower, widened and deepened until it was an enormous thoroughfare. Other tunnels continually entered it. Conn felt like a blood corpuscle taking a sight-seeing trip through a venous system.

After another half mile, they came

abruptly upon a vast bulkhead set across the tunnel. It was of heavy wrought iron, set in granite and it looked as solid as Gibraltar. The leader hastened up and knocked, then peered through a small grille that opened. After a few words a small panel slid aside and Conn ducked through with the others.

He was so astonished he halted in his tracks and stared. A breeze struck his face, warm and perfumed. Before him stretched a vast arcade. At least a hundred feet high, twice as wide, it stretched far down like a blazing underground station. It was entirely floored with white sparkling sand, and checkered with small white cottages. The roofs were of tile in scarlet, green and blue. Palms clustered around the cottages, throwing a light shade.

Yes, there was shade. Conn stared up at the roof of the arcade and blinked. It was a solid sheet of luminescence that blazed and bathed him with warmth. There were small crowds of people, all wearing bathing suits, and all looked tanned and healthy. It was an underground beach resort, Conn thought. It looked like a subway version of Miami Beach.

"Nice, eh?" a voice grunted alongside.

Conn turned. The three men who had brought him were shucking the heavy furs that had given them the rabbit appearance. Their leader stood alongside him in sandals and trunks. He, too, was tanned, and his muscles were impressive.

He took Conn down the arcade. As they passed through the crowds Conn gaped at the well-built men and women. The girls, he thought dazedly, looked as though they assembled for a beauty contest, and their scant suits left nothing to the imagination. Not that he objected.

CONN was embarrassed at the way the crowd stared at his clothes and rucksack. He was relieved when he was taken into a large stucco building of two stories and rushed upstairs. By now he was so dizzy that everything seemed to whirl in white blazes before his eyes. He was conscious of marble steps and a broad door. Then he was in a room standing before a table. There were men seated at the table, some young, mostly old. They wore official-looking tunics and all had a keenness, almost a harshness, about them that was frightening.

"Well, Bradley?" The man at the head of the table spoke. He was iron-gray. His face was gray under its slight tan, and his eyes had gray lights in them. The lines on his face looked like the creases formed when iron is bent.

"Look what I've got, Rollins," Bradley began without preamble. "It fell into the new shaft we were working at three-level-fifteen—" He jerked a thumb at Conn.

"Fell in!" exclaimed Rollins. The others looked agitated. "Is he a Swast?"

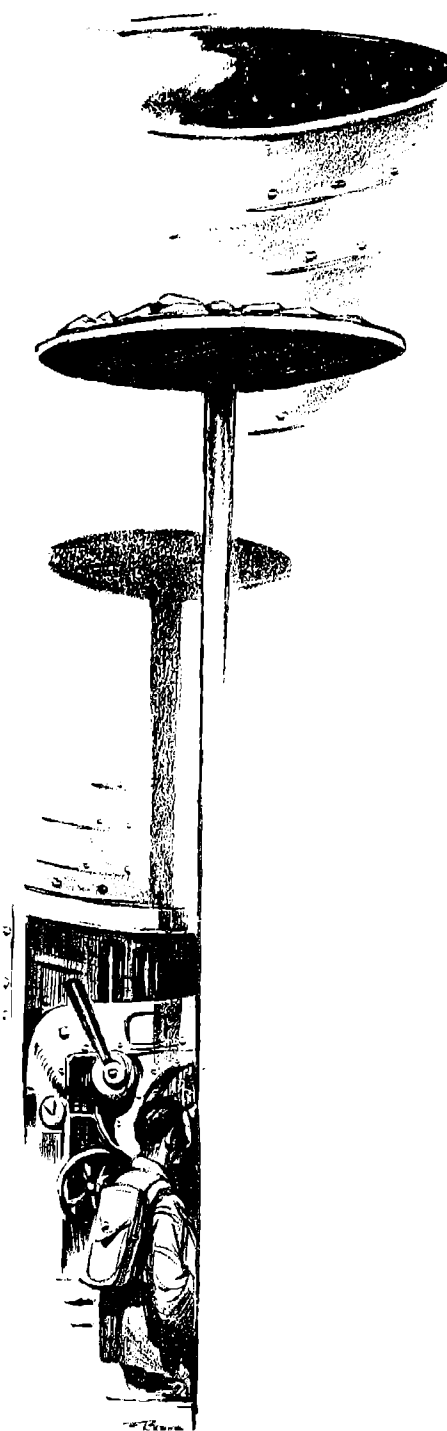
"Certainly he's a Swast," burst forth one of the younger men. He leaped up excitedly and pounded the table. "That's the man that shot down six of us an hour ago—you know. I told you the story. He used some kind of new percussion gun."

Wearily Conn thought: I'm crazy. We're all crazy. I go back to my world and find King Arthur aloft and Miami Beach below. The Swasts call me Reader and the Readers call me Swast. And who in hell cares—

He said: "I'm not a Swast."

"He's lying!" the young man shouted. He turned to Rollins. "It'll be a great pleasure, Peter, if you'll let me supervise the execution."

"I'm not lying," Conn said. He



squared his shoulders. This was going to be tough to explain. "I admit killing six of your men. But it . . . it was a misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding!" Bradley snorted.

"Yes, just that. I've got a long story to tell, but maybe I'm not going to live long enough to tell it. Here's the tail-end, anyway. I came to the top of that hill. I saw two men attacked by twenty. I didn't know who was fighting whom for what, and I didn't care. I just pitched in on the short side. That was the way I was brought up to do things."

"You were brought up to do things impetuously," said Rollins softly, but iron bit through his words. "Sometimes it pays to stop and think of what may lie under appearances."

Conn said: "Yeah. The two babies I helped out turned on me half an hour later. For some peculiar reason or other—"

"To hell with his story," the violent young man blurted. "He's a Swast. He's killed six of our men. The tunnel's caved in at three-eleven-fifteen and God knows what'll happen when the Swasts at the castle find that out—"

"They've found out by now," put in Bradley.

"Oh, my heavens!" groaned the young man. "Rollins, this is no time for—"

"One moment!" Rollins said. He eyed Conn curiously. "This man wears strange clothing. You say he used a strange weapon. He says the Swasts turned on him for a peculiar reason. I'd like to know that reason."

"The reason," Conn said, "was books."

There was an appalled silence. In it Conn watched the table, faces and room begin to whirl around his head.

"You said books?" Rollins inquired softly.

"I said books!" Conn shouted. He swung the rucksack off his shoulder and hurled the contents fluttering in the faces of the men. They squawked as the volumes clattered over the table and dove for them. "I said books!" Conn roared, "and what's more I mean books. Books, books, books!"

He turned on Bradley and planted his fist just under the ear. Bradley went down with a groan. Conn dove across the table and pistoned his fists into the violent young man's middle. He took four punches and then folded up with a surprised look on his face. Conn twisted and prepared to charge out through the door. Then the white floor leaped up and smote him full in the face.

IV.

ROLLINS said: "Sorry we had to lay you out."

Conn rolled over and sat up. He was at the edge of a small cot. Around him were myriads of shelves and bottles. Sinks, oil lamps, candles, lots of glittering glass and stone-ware. There was no one else around but Rollins.

"This is my lab," Rollins said.

"You mean padded cell," Conn groaned. He stared out the window at the brilliant sparkle and felt hot and feverish. "Listen," he said, "either you're crazy or I'm crazy. If I am, you can go ahead and lock me up. But before you do I've got to tell you something because if I don't get my story out I'm going to tear things apart again."

"Go ahead," Rollins said quietly. He pointed to the pile of books and canned film lying alongside the rucksack. "I figure you've got quite a story to tell."

"What's the year?" Conn asked. "2941."

"It is, eh? Oh— Well, all right, Rollins, see if you can work this out. I'm a stranger, see? My names is David Conn. To the best of my knowledge I've neither seen nor heard of Readers, Swats or any other phase of the life you people seem to live. Now here's the hitch. In the year 2941, I lived on earth. My earth was a highly civilized and mechanized society. It was a planet entirely covered by one gigantic city. There wasn't a green field, a river or a forest anywhere. Half the ocean beds had been filled in to make room for the city of man—"

"You said earth?" Rollins interrupted. "Our earth?"

"Our earth, our moon, our sun, our stars—the very same. We had already solved the problem of rocket flights and were in contact with the other planets. We had begun to attack the question of atomic energy in real earnest and felt that with our advanced science we might solve it in a few centuries. We had even investigated the mechanics of Time, and one of us, a man by the name of Dunbar, had solved the problem."

"Time—" Rollins nodded slowly. "Time travel. I might have known."

"Yes, that it—" Conn paused and felt a wave of helplessness rush over him. "Yes, Dunbar solved time travel; I was his assistant. In April, 2941, Dunbar and I set up the apparatus in the heart of a granite outcropping—the same hill where I unfortunately killed six of your men. As Dunbar's assistant I was the first to use the machine. He sent me back a thousand years as a kind of journalist in Time. I had plenty of money, equipment and so forth. I was instructed to return within a year to April, 2941—return to a moment but a few minutes later than

that in which I'd left. When I did return— I was here."

"I see," Rollins said. He paced a little and fingered one of Conn's books. The bright light flooded his features and softened them. "And you want me to explain, eh? Well, I'd best begin by saying that theoretically you don't exist here."

Conn reached out a hand and gripped Rollin's arm firmly. "What's this," he inquired, "ghosts?"

"I said 'theoretically.' You and I are cousins, Conn, or better still, stepbrothers. I see that your race was strong on the mechanical side—you could build time machines. We couldn't do that, but we have our strength, too. Theory. And I'm afraid you people were weak there."

"I don't like the way you use the past tense," Conn said. "It makes me feel that my world is dead."

"The only correct tense," Rollins answered, "hasn't been invented yet. It would have to be the alternative tense. Sit back a little and let me explain. You're real, don't worry about that. You and your world were always real. In 2941 when you started your journey through Time, you were a reality. In 1941 you were a reality. But now, back in 2941, you're an alternative reality existing in the wrong alternate. That's why I said theoretically you don't exist here."

"Alternative?" Conn said. He felt in his pockets for cigarettes. That was the second wonderful habit he'd acquired in the twentieth century. The first was loving Hilda.

"It's like this," Rollins went on. "The future can never affect the past without becoming part of the past—and thus destroying itself."

"As for instance?"

"Well," said Rollins, "take this set-up. A man enters a house and wonders whether to go upstairs or

downstairs. He doesn't know it, but if he goes up he'll meet a girl whom he'll marry and if he goes down he'll meet a man who'll murder him. Now at the moment he enters the house and wonders which to do, there are two alternatively possible futures awaiting him—murder or marriage. His choice decides which of those futures he shall enter and make real for himself, although in theory each alternative future may coexist and be real unto itself."

Conn said: "Ouch!"

"And by the time this man makes up his mind," Rollins continued inexorably, "and starts either up or down—that same choice becomes part of the past—the very same past which affects and controls the future. You couldn't have a future of marriage without a past of choosing to walk upstairs. See?"

"I think so," said Conn.

"Now THEN, suppose at the moment of choice, the skies suddenly cleaved apart and a head appeared, saying: 'John Smith, this is your grandson speaking to you from the future. Unless you walk upstairs, you will not meet Dorris Dce, you won't get married, and I'll never exist. Therefore I command you to walk upstairs.'"

Conn laughed.

"In theory," Rollins smiled, "this could happen, because there would be the possibility of such a grandson. However he would never say those words because the past for him—which would be John Smith's future—would of necessity have been Smith's walking upstairs. He would take that for granted. But here's the twist which your Dunbar neglected. If the grandson did appear and in some way affected John Smith's choice so as to send him upstairs, the grandson could never

again return to his own present, in other words, to the future."

"Why not?"

"Because the future is controlled and molded by the past. The future in which the grandson existed depended on John Smith standing *alone* and deciding to go upstairs. Having once appeared to John Smith and influenced him to go upstairs, he has so altered the past that his future no longer exists for him. He will have to return to another future."

"Wait a minute," Conn groaned. "We're weak in theory, same like you said. Put it in simple terms."

"Let's try it with symbols," said Rollins. He picked up a slate and pencil. "Take this equation: **SUM OF THE PAST=THE FUTURE**. Let ABC represent the past. Then $ABC=abc$, the future. You see that abc is the only possible logical result of ABC. If the past had been BCA, then the future would be bac. I think you'll see, moreover, that at the moment of present when factors A, B and C exist, there are six alternatively possible futures: abc, bac, cab and so on."

"I've got that," Conn said.

"Hold on to it, then," Rollins chuckled, "because I'm almost finished. Here's the joker Dunbar neglected. Suppose that in the equation $ABC=abc$, factor b of alternative future abc traveled back through Time, past the equal sign to visit ABC. Then b becomes a member of the group ABC, and by that very act makes it impossible for him to return; although his own present may continue to exist, it can never again exist for him."

"Why not?"

"Because the past for him will now contain the factors ABC plus b. In other words, $ABC+b$ can never equal abc. That time equation

wouldn't balance. So, although b can reverse his time machine and go back to his own date, he will never find the reality of the present he left. He will always land in another of the infinite number of alternate futures coexisting. $ABC+b$ may result in abcb, abbc, babc and so on—but never in abc!"

"I get it," Conn said. "You're trying to say that by traveling back into my past I've switched over to a different track so that I couldn't move forward again on my original track."

"I'm trying to say more than that," Rollins broke in. "I'm saying that you'll never be able to move forward on the same track twice. In other words, that time travel is impossible in the sense that a man can take a journey to the past and return to his starting present."

"You see, you could continue to shuttle back and forth between 1941 and 2941, but although for obvious reasons you'd find the same present in 1941, you'd never find the same in 2941. There are an infinite number of alternative coexistent futures. Each time you made a round trip you'd create another infinitude of alternates. Representing each trip as an equation, here's the mathematical proof of why, once you'd traveled back in Time you could never return to your starting point—"

Rollins wrote swiftly:

- (1) $ABC=abc$
- (2) $ABC+b=abc+b$
- (3) $ABC+2b=abc+2b$
- (4) $ABC+3b=abc+3b \dots$
- (n) $ABC+n(b)=abc+n(b)$

CONN's fingers shook, but he finally managed to get the cigarette lit. The flaring match looked dull

in the bright light. Conn held the match until it seared his fingers.

He dragged on the cigarette. He thought: This is a lovely mess. It serves me right—leaving Hilda and dithering about duty to a man, to an existence I'll never see again. Maybe Dunbar will send someone else back to look for me. Maybe he'll send back dozens, wondering why none return. Maybe he'll figure out what Rollins here calls the joker.

And all that while he was filled with a bitter sense of futility, the nostalgia of a man lost to everything. He wasn't even a man, he thought, he was only an alternative—a mere probability that coexisted with an infinitude of other probabilities. All the probable Conns should get together, he thought grimly, and kick him.

At last he said wearily: "What about the Swasts—and the Readers—and the fighting. This tunnel system; the castle and all that?"

Rollins smiled. "I'd have to give you a thousand years of history. This is it briefly. About nine hundred years ago, America was invaded and conquered by a horde of Nagees. Their credo was the superiority of brute strength over reason. Their symbol was the swastika from which comes their present name—"

"Nagee," Conn said, "or Nazi. Of course. I should have realized. But according to history Nazism never reached America. It was defeated in Europe around 1970—"

"I said this was the history of our alternate," Rollins answered. "At any rate, the few Americans who held out and fought a guerrilla war became known as Readers because of their respect for learning. That's why the mere possession of books got you into trouble with the Swasts

you unfortunately aided, and why they got you out of a tight spot with us. Your books and records will be invaluable for us; but I should like to ask about the cans of celluloid pictures—"

"Motion pictures," Conn said. "My notes will show you how to build a projector. They'll do more for you than all the books. What about that castle?"

"It's the last stronghold of the Swasts in America. They took possession of that building centuries ago. Originally it had been used for something important by the Readers, but unfortunately our records don't say—"

There was a sharp knock on the door and Bradley almost shot through. Nevertheless he clamped down his impatience and waited for a chance to speak.

"Listen," Conn said, "don't think I'm ungrateful, but I'd like to get out of your world. You seem to have it nicely worked out. It's a beautiful place down here, but I'd rather not stay. I'd . . . I'd like to—"

He had to stop. The memory of Hilda choked him. When he realized how near she was, how swiftly the machine in the hill could return him to her, he trembled with eagerness.

"I'd like to recharge my batteries," Conn said. "I'd like to go back into the past and stay there. You said I'd find it the same?"

"The same." Rollins nodded. "It takes time, lots of time before the alternate futures split off and differentiate. You'll find the same 1941 you left—but I'm afraid I don't know what you mean by 'recharge.'"

"Batteries," Conn repeated. He smothered a growing sense of panic. "Accumulators—you know, generators, electricity, batteries—"

Rollins shook his head sadly.

"We've been trying to recapture the lost art of electrical engineering for generations," he said. "So far it's evaded us."

"Then we'll work it out together," Conn snapped. "In my records you'll find all the material necessary to recapture your lost art. In a month I'll have this place electrified, and in two months I'll be going back to—"

He broke off. Rollins' face had dissolved into an expression of incredulity mixed with childish delight. He gripped Conn's shoulders and stared, eyes filling. Then Bradley stepped forward.

"In a month," Bradley said, "there won't be anything to electrify."

"What's that?" Rollins started.

"I said there won't be anything left," Bradley answered in a queer, harsh voice. "There won't be any underground—any Readers—anything. The Swasts have returned to three-level-fifteen. They're following the lead and blasting every tunnel wide open with their lances. They'll reach the city in an hour. It's all up."

Conn finally realized what Bradley meant.

"Nothing's all up," he growled. "I'm getting back to 1941 if I have to win your war for you." He slapped Bradley and Rollins smartly on the shoulders. "Pick up your faces, Readers, I've brought a few tricks with me from a thousand years ago that're going to make a hell of a lot of difference in this future. Let's go to the council room!"

V.

FACES LOOKED UP from the table as they entered. Dismayed faces. Rollins rapped his knuckles on the table.

"In the emergency," he said,

"David Conn will supervise defensive tactics. Please!" He held up his hand. "I understand that Conn has come to us under highly embarrassing circumstances. I have heard his story and I assure you that I have full confidence in him. I think you will, too, when you've had time to hear his explanations. For the moment I think it would be wise to have faith in his leadership."

Rollins escorted Conn to the head of the table and seated himself alongside. There were grumbles from the others and a low whistle of surprise. Eventually they all nodded.

"The first thing," Conn said swiftly, "is arms. What have you?"

"Just the lances," Bradley answered. "That's all."

"What's the mechanism of those lances—the silent explosions?"

The hot-headed young man spoke up. Rollins leaned toward Conn. "Name is Wilder," he answered. "Chief technician. Be nice to him. He didn't relish those punches."

"We really don't know," Wilder was saying. "Actually the lances are no more than self-coiling spring guns. They shoot a radioactive pellet—Uranium 237. The same isotope gives us light and heat in the form of slow radiation. We treat minute particles to disintegrate on violent contact and they induce subsidiary disintegration in the surrounding area."

"I get it," Conn said. "You use spring propulsion for gradual acceleration. If you shot the particles out too hard, they'd explode at the moment of initial impulse and blow up gun and shooter."

Wilder glowered. "That's what I was about to say."

"What's the range of your lances?"

"Thirty or forty yards."

"What about explosives. Gun-cotton? TNT?"

All looked blank. Conn realized that this was another lost art for the Readers. He turned quickly to Bradley.

"Just what are the Swasts doing? Coming down through the tunnels after us?"

"Hell, no!" Bradley looked furious. "They won't come into the tunnels yet, not until they're too deep for blasting. Right now they're opening up the small capilaries from the surface. Sort of plowing them open with their lances—"

He caught himself, raised his head and stared into space. Conn, too, had sensed the vibrations. Seconds later, it seemed, he heard a mutter. The sound boulders make when they rumble down the slope of a distant valley.

Bradley whispered: "No! Not yet!" He leaped to his feet and tore out of the room, Conn hard on his heels. The others followed.

Outside, under the glittering cavern ceiling, the Readers were dashing about in fright. Bradley had paused with ear cocked toward the cavern entrance. Again came the muttering rumble as the earth underneath them shook. Squads of Readers, bearing lances, were sprinting down toward the entrance. Men were herding the women and children back toward the recesses. Bradley stopped one.

"What is it?" he demanded.

The man looked weary. "Swasts!" he said. He had a kid under his arm, a two-year-old that was crying lustily. "The Swasts have come down through the tunnel—all of them. Hundreds. They're outside the gate now, trying to blast through."

As he started off with the child, Conn stopped him.

"Going out the back way?" he

asked, pointing toward the recesses of the arcade.

The man shook his head. "There isn't any back way," he said. "We just hide in the depths—"

"In three hundred years," Bradley said apathetically, "the Swasts have never dared to attack us at our gates. There was never any need for more than one exit—"

Conn grabbed Bradley's arm and shook the man until he appeared to waken. "How long can you hold the gate?" Conn asked. He repeated the question until Bradley answered.

"Twelve hours, maybe. The gate's strong, but not enough."

"Twelve hours is enough time for me!" Conn shook Bradley again. "Snap out of it. I got you into this mess and I'll get you out. You're my lieutenant, understand? Go down and see to the gates. I'll be along—"

BRADLEY NODDED mutely. Life began to flow back into his eyes. Conn gave him a push and he galloped down the cavern toward the gate.

"Rollins!" snapped Conn. "I've got to work fast. I'll need the help of every technician you can spare—plus a squad of diggers."

"You'll have them."

"Get the diggers first. I want a shaft sent up from the cavern to the surface. You can drill, blast, dig or scratch with your fingernails—I don't care how, so long as it's done in six hours."

"You're mad," Wilder snarled. "Even granting it could be done."

"It can," interrupted a young man with a snub nose. "The rock overhead and through this entire sector is honeycombed with passages and faults. It'll be dangerous—but we can do it."

"Granting that," snapped Wilder, "there's no sense creating another

hazard for us and another vantage point for the Swasts. We're trying to hold them off from one entrance. You're planning another."

"That so?" Conn eyed Wilder and wanted to punch him again. "Maybe it hasn't occurred to you that we're trapped down here. If we don't do something but quick, it won't matter how many holes the cavern's got in it. We won't be alive to know the difference."

Rollins had given the order for the diggers. The snub-nosed young man ran off to supervise. Conn took Rollins and the rest of the technicians back to the lab. The same glittering light pouring through the windows gave him the impression that less than a few moments had elapsed since he'd first sat up on the cot. It was peculiar not to have a sun that moved. Phony.

Conn glanced at the lab, then at the nervous men around him. He thought: It's all my fault. If I don't use my head and figure something out, then there won't be any more phony sun, any more Readers or cavern. It's a thousand years from 1941, but I still hate the Nazis and their children's children. I hate everything they stand for. I hate the thought of what'll happen to those strong, clean people and children, those pretty girls—"

He couldn't think about that. It brought Hilda to his mind again. Conn shivered and tried to concentrate on the job ahead. He had to figure something out.

"Rollins," he said, "you don't know what I mean, but we need munitions. Explosives. Could you build up big pellets of Uranium 237—sort of bombs?"

Rollins shook his head. "Impossible," he answered. "They'd burn the men to crisps before they could

get near them. There's no known insulation—"

Conn said: "Yeah." He tapped his teeth with the slate pencil and stared around the laboratory, gazing abstractly at the bottles. They were of heavy glass—so heavy they wouldn't break if you dropped them. Conn looked at the reagents. The Readers had evidently lost the art of chemical notation, but maybe they'd rediscovered the essential ingredients of what he needed. Maybe—

"Potassium nitrate?" Conn said. "Got it? Also known as—"

"Plenty," answered Rollins.

"How about sulphur? Yes? Fine. Charcoal and wax? Yes?" Conn went into action. He lined up the technicians before him. "From now on you boys are just cooks. Is that understood? You're to follow my instructions to the letter. Make this up. Potassium nitrate, sixty-five percent. Sulphur, two percent. Charcoal, twenty percent. Plain wax to make up the rest."

Pencils squeaked on slates. Heads nodded.

"When you've compounded this I want it packed carefully into heavy pint-sized bottles," Conn went on. He picked up a specimen. "Like this. I want the mouths corked tight. Through the corks, well into the compound, and extending at least a foot outside, I want you to run a heavy candle wick. Got that?"

He started to leave while they were still nodding. At the door he paused. "One last word, boys. Treat this mixture extra gentle, please. And if you value your lives, don't let a spark of flame come near it."

He vaulted down the stairs and set off for the cavern gate. The cavern itself was deserted. All the noncombatants had withdrawn to the deep recesses. As Conn ap-

proached the gate he passed the scattered signs of hasty flight. Children's toys, a sandal, a handful of grapes, and a little portrait painted on wood. Conn wondered if the owner would live to pick it up.

The gate itself was shuddering with palsy. The muttering rumbles continued without pause now, and Conn understood that the Swasts were blasting it continually on the other side. There were no more than a hundred and fifty Readers marshaled with lances, and for the first time Conn realized how appalling the odds were. He located Bradley.

"How goes it?" he asked.

"It could be better," Bradley said. "Thank heavens there's solid rock around that gate. It'll hold for a time. These lances can't blast through rock very quickly—only earth."

"You haven't got many men," Conn said.

Bradley looked over the little army. "We've got twenty more," he answered, "but they're busy digging to the surface. What's the general idea?"

"It's old where I come from," Conn said. "When the enemy attacks and you're fighting a losing battle, the only way to make him draw off is to counterattack him where it hurts. That's what we're going to do. Any idea where it'll hurt?"

Bradley stared. "The castle?" he gasped.

"That's it," said Conn grimly.

VI.

IT WAS two hundred feet to the surface. The shaft had been started from a side of the cavern and thrust upward in a zigzag course that took advantage of every rock fault and slide. Conn tugged experimentally

at the rope ladder that hung down from the open mouth of the shaft above him. The ladder still quivered from the heels of the last Reader to mount.

"That's a hundred," Bradley said. He strapped his lance across his back and looked at Conn. "Now what?"

"Go on up yourself," Conn said tensely. "Keep your men under cover up there and wait for me. I'll be along in no time to speak of."

Bradley nodded and started up the ropes. In a few seconds his mounting legs disappeared in the dark shaft mouth. Conn picked up his bulging rucksack and slung it gingerly over his shoulder. In it were twenty-five pints of destruction. He didn't relish the idea of carrying it up through the narrow, twisting shaft. That was why he wanted his little army to be in the clear in case of accidents.

The snub-nosed mine technician placed a hand on Conn's shoulder. "Be careful going up," he said. "You're not acquainted with our terrain. This is all loose granite rock. It's honeycombed with flaws and faults, and our tunnels haven't done much to strengthen it. Too much of a jar might start a slide that would result in the settling of all the rock for miles around. This cavern—everything—would be crushed."

Conn said: "Thanks for the bedtime story." He tried to make it sound funny. To Rollins he said: "Here are your orders. Hold the gate with your skeleton crew at all costs. Only send your women and children up this ladder as a last result. The Swasts would slaughter them in open country. Don't worry. I'll get you out of this mess. I swear it!"

He started up the ladder. It quivered and shook, and his rucksack thumped slightly against his

back. It was pitch black in the shaft, but the Readers had coated one strand of the rope ladder with uranium. It glowed before him like a never-ending worm.

The ladder arose for seventy feet, and Conn bruised elbows and knees against the rough shaft wall. Then he came to a small shelf. He crawled over and followed the rope along the gutter of a narrow mounting tube that had razor sides. He could hear his clothing shred, and the rucksack caught on the projections and tugged at him. The glass clinked.

A rock slipped under him and he heard it go thundering down the tube. A dull muttering began and then a creak and a whisper. He thought it must be the echo of the fall, but it sounded more like the scream of rock under pressure. Conn swallowed hard and tried to climb faster. If the shifting layers of granite cut the ladder above him—

The tube ended and the ladder mounted again. Conn climbed through open space, swinging like a pendulum. He had no idea how long he struggled. He lost count of rungs. In the black nothingness he was cut off from time altogether. But at last his groping hand touched rock and he wormed his way between two flat masses of stone barely three feet apart.

They were like two vast palms. Giant palms waiting to press slowly together and mash him to butter. Conn pulled himself upward with fingernails, not daring to listen to the whisper and mutter of the trembling rock. The trembling turned into a shake and the sound grew. He could sense the heavy palms pressing gently together. He groaned and struggled feverishly. It would be a very slow death, very gentle and very horrible.

Then hands gripped him and

pulled upward. Bradley whispered: "Sh-h-h-h—" and Conn was blissfully aware of night wind on his face, stars overhead and the comforting nearness of a hundred fighting men. He lay a while until he caught his breath.

It would be about three or four in the morning, Conn thought. The moon had passed the zenith and was a small silver apple dropping to the west. He got to his feet and peered cautiously around. A mile across the fields towered the castle. About a quarter of a mile to one side was a large black smudge that made quiet noises.

"Horses," Bradley said. "The Swasts have got them picketed there under a small guard. Have to give 'em a wide berth."

Conn nodded. In a single file they started out, bending low to get all the cover the wheat afforded. There was hardly any sound. The Readers, after hundreds of years of skulking, knew how to move quietly.

THEY APPROACHED the hill and swiftly passed it. Conn thought: Time is peculiar. I always knew it was, but it never affected me personally. If this ruse works, we'll wipe out the Swasts. Maybe in a month or two I'll be able to build enough equipment to recharge my batteries and get back to Hilda. Maybe I'll get back to the day after I left her— She'll have missed me only a day, and yet I'll have missed her for ten weeks—

The thought came to him that he might take Rollins back through Time with him. Rollins could gather up every clue he needed to recreate an advanced civilization in his own time. Then Conn shrugged. He'd forgotten. Rollins would make it ABC plus 3b. He could never return to his own alternate. Rollins,

too, would become a probable man. No, there was nothing more Conn could do for these people. They had his records. That would be enough.

Bradley caught his arm.

"This is it," he whispered. "Probably the Swasts left a guard. We'd better be careful."

The castle loomed before them. It was a high square building with a tower at each corner. Around the building the Swasts had constructed a heavy rubble wall at least twenty feet high. It would be impossible to climb it. The Swasts could shoot them down as they came over the crest.

Conn lit a cigarette. He brought the rucksack around under his arm and opened the flap so that he could dip in quickly and grab a bottle. The Readers formed a wedge behind him and they advanced cautiously, with Conn at the apex.

Suddenly lights flared and a gong began to bang. It was so deep-toned it had no sound. It just pressed on the ears. Beat—beat—beat— From the towers giant torches flared, spraying ruddy light over the surrounding terrain, flooding the grounds with brightness. There were shouts from the castle and flaming craters began to appear before them.

"Alarm!" Bradlew shouted above the roar of the torches. "They've given the alarm!"

Conn growled: "Keep moving!" He sprinted.

He cradled the rucksack in his arms and wondered if a lance blast would reach him. The craters were coming dangerously close. If he was hit, he and his little army would go up in an explosion that would sing the end of the Readers. He didn't want to lose this last battle with the Nazis. The Battle of America.

Conn pulled out a bottle and touched the fuse tip to his glowing cigarette ember. It fizzed and flamed. Still on the run, he yanked back his arm, striking Bradley across the shoulder. He almost dropped the bomb, but managed to let it fly. It exploded as it reached the wall, and the bang hurt his ears. But when the dense smoke drifted, he saw that part of the rubble had disappeared.

Bradley exclaimed hoarsely and there were terrified yelps from the Readers.

Conn lit another fuse and sent the bottle toward the breach. This time a rumble of clattering stones followed the explosion and the wall came down for a space of twenty feet.

They reached the wall and huddled under its cover just to one side of the breach. It was cool there after the heat from the giant torches. Conn watched the haze of craters exploding silently in the breach. He thought: They're covering it. Anyone trying to get through there will go up in a puff.

"The noise!" Bradley screamed. "It'll bring the other Swasts back!"

"That was the general idea," Conn said.

He lit a third fuse and heaved the bottle far down the length of the wall. It exploded with a boom, and rubble forty feet away clattered. As it did, he had already lit a fourth fuse. It was a long chance, but he had to take it. Maybe the Swasts in the castle would cover the site of the fresh explosion. They ought to be bewildered.

Conn jerked to his feet and stepped around into the open breach. A black arch showed in the side of the castle, just before him. He let fly toward it and dove back to cover as the bomb blasted. When he



"The swine's a Reader! He's got a book!"

crawled back to look, he saw a great jagged rent where the arch had been. Light shone through twisted window frames. He had blasted in a row of castle windows. It was crazy, but he noted that they were Gothic. High and pointed.

"Bradley," Conn said, "take half your men and go to the second breach I made. You'll wait until you hear two more bombs land—then make a dash to get into the castle."

Bradley nodded and vanished. Fifty men, lances poised in their hands, drifted off into the darkness.

CONN peered around the corner of the breach and heaved two bombs in quick succession. The first had too short a fuse. It exploded while it was still rolling. He heard the

whine of glass fragments. Conn cursed Wilder. The second plunged into the castle and went off with a muffled bang. Screams sounded.

He puffed his cigarette and barked: "Come on!" and then they were swerving around the breach and legging it for the hole. The craters flared and men began to drop with choked grunts. To one side Conn saw Bradley's men hurdling rock fragments and charging down the second breach. A dozen disappeared in silent flowers of light while they were jumping. The rest converged toward the rent windows.

Conn lit a fuse on the run and hurled it before him. By the time the bomb exploded, he had already entered the castle. What he could see of the room he entered was a shambles. It had evidently been

some kind of vast hall. Now the flagged flooring was shattered. The walls toppled and the ceiling overhead sagged. Splotches of ghastly blood and flesh pasted pieces of mail armor to the stone.

Hoarse bellows came from above, and then from behind. Craters leaped and flared. Conn saw the Swasts were firing down through the gaps in the ceiling. Before him was the broken remnant of a broad stairway. The shouting Readers behind him went sprinting up.

Conn pulled to a halt. He grabbed Bradley as the man hurtled by and brought him to one side.

"Listen," shouted Conn. Bradley looked around wildly. He licked his lips.

"We've broken them!" Bradley panted. He looked exultant. "The last stronghold's fallen. We can mop up in here inside of an hour." He tugged to follow his men. Conn could hear the shouting and crashes of falling stone as the Readers blasted through the floors above.

"Listen," Conn repeated. "We've only done a quarter of the job. The rest of the Swasts will be back any minute. Keep half of your men for mopping up. Send down the rest to me to hold the Swasts."

Bradley nodded and ran. Conn counted bombs. Twenty left. He stared around the broken hall, wondering what it could have been. There were broken marble pillars and fragments of what looked like sarcophagae. Could the Swasts have buried their men inside this hall? A graveyard? There were the tapestries, too. Great hangings, now torn and spattered. Most confusing of all was the giant Sphinx at the head of the stairs. It had a ruined face and it looked incredibly old. Maybe the Swasts were collectors of art. That

didn't seem to jibe with what Rollins had said.

Twenty Readers came vaulting down the stairs. They were torn and looked blood-drunk. Conn lined them up and tried to shake sense into them, but they muttered to themselves incessantly and fingered their lances. It was impossible to shake a thousand years of hatred out of their veins all at once.

They trotted out on the double and Conn spaced them along the crest of the wall. He had barely returned to his own position when his ears caught the thunder of hoofs. He lit another cigarette and watched the far fringes of the blood-red floodlit area. Dim shapes galloping there. There was the ruby glint of light on metal and the long streaks that were lances. Craters began to flame again. Along the wall the Readers yelled.

Conn heaved a bomb. It exploded far short, but the whirling fragments of glass whistled around a horse and rider. The horse reared and screamed. Conn didn't like that. The rider went jerking to the ground. Conn saw him get to his feet and run back to the cover of darkness. The Swasts continued to circle and fire.

Bradley ran out with a small squad, yelling for Conn.

Conn shouted: "Here!"

"This is no good," Bradley panted. "They can keep us besieged and still attack the cavern. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Conn spat. "I'd counted on getting out of the castle before they returned and ambushing them."

Bradley said: "We might be able to pick them off better from up above. We've got to make a helluva fight of it here and now. Otherwise we'll be worse off than before."

VII.

CONN ORDERED ten of Bradley's men to the walls. The rest followed him and Bradley went back into the castle. They clattered up the stairway and rounded the Sphinx. Bradley led Conn through a low hall racked on all sides with arms. The middle was aisled with shattered crystal cases. Within the cases were tumbled heaps of armor.

"Storeroom," Bradley grunted.

But it didn't look like one to Conn. He could understand the Swasts getting their armor here, but it still didn't look like a storeroom. As they ran through with their little squad, his mind struggled with the problem.

Bradley led him briskly past a hall filled with paintings and statuary, up another flight of stairs and into a large room that was the entire width of the tower. Conn gaped and skittered to a halt.

"Come on," Bradley snapped. "Don't let this place scare you. I don't know what it is, but it's nothing to worry about."

Only Conn knew. Suddenly he understood. He looked at the scale models on the walls; at the tiny helicopter hanging from the ceiling; and lastly at the giant tractor within the crystal case. Suddenly he realized that the Swasts had appropriated a museum, of all places, for their last stronghold.

"Wait a minute," he said to Bradley's excited yells. He walked to the case within which stood the tractor. It was a dump machine with a vast steel bin in the rear that had evidently been used to cart tons of earth or stone. Probably, he thought, it was a twenty-first-century model, for it was better than anything 1940 had seen, and it was Diesel powered. That was what gave him the idea.

He'd fight a 1940 war in 2941 with a harmless 2040 machine. Abruptly he seized a lance from one of the Readers and shattered the crystal case.

A cloud of gas, so pungent it almost knocked him over, whiffed around him as he stepped through the naked case frame. That was a good sign. Whoever had set up this tractor exhibit had taken pains to make sure it would remain in good condition.

It seemed to be a new machine. The steel gleamed and the rivet heads were solid. Conn went over it. Cylinder heads; crankshaft; exhaust manifold; the fuel feed pump—everything was in brand-new condition.

"Bradley!" he said curtly. "How do the Swasts get those big torches in the towers. Oil?"

Bradley nodded.

"Then take all these men and get up to the towers. Locate the oil-feed and bring down all the oil you can carry. Make it fast!"

Bradley gaped and flared into action. He drove the squad before him up toward the towers. Conn carefully laid his rucksack of bombs in a corner, ferreted out a small oil lamp and began heating the cylinders. Diesels had to be plenty hot before they started.

The Readers began to hurry back for containers. Conn dumped mineral exhibits on the floor and gave them the metal bins. He ripped his shirt off and improvised a cloth filter. From the Diesel came the strong odor of heating metal.

They were able to collect a total of fifteen gallons. As Conn refiltered it and waited for the Diesel to heat, he reflected that that would be enough to drive him to California and back. He improvised a funnel and poured the oil into the fuel tank.

The fuel-system filter, he saw, was of the waste type. The cotton wadding was fresh and white.

The Diesel was fitted with an electric starter. The batteries were dry and Conn sent Bradley for water and filled them. They'd still have to be charged, and although Conn noted a five-hundred-watt generator connected to them, the generator wouldn't charge them until the Diesel was turning. He'd have to start the Diesel by hand.

They ran a loop of heavy rope around the fly wheel and Conn got a good running start and yanked. The wheel turned crustily. He kept yanking until he was exhausted. Then Bradley took over. He was prodigiously muscled, Conn remembered. Now the muscles cracked and strained. Abruptly the tractor coughed and bellowed. Bradley had the rope burned through his palms. He spit on them, yowling with pain.

But the tractor was rattling and bellowing furiously, and Conn knew the war was more than half won.

"Sorry, Brad!" Conn yelled. He shouldered his sack of bombs and vaulted into the driver's seat. "Get your men into the back."

THE READERS gathered up their lances and helped Bradley into the vast steel bin behind. Conn threw in the clutch. The tractor coughed again and calmly shuddered through a pair of cases before he could get it turned. He drove it shakily down the stairs while the men bounced and murmured in the bin and Bradley cursed fiendishly at his raw palms.

In the armor room, Conn rammed through half a dozen exhibits as an experiment. This tractor, he thought, was almost as deadly as the best Panzer tank. He swerved around the giant Sphinx and charged down

the broken stairway, fragments of stone and steel crackling under the treads.

The rent windows were a little too narrow. The treads kicked out space for themselves and left crumbling stone behind. Conn drove up to the breach in the wall and yelled for the Readers. A score of them mustered enough courage to vault into the bin. They could conceal themselves, Conn figured, and fire out at the Swasts. The steel would protect them. He was the only one exposed, but he'd have to take the chance.

As he thundered through the breach in the rubble wall, he saw the Swasts were still galloping around the castle. Squads of them were poised on the flanks waiting to rush in. Conn fumbled at the dashboard and tried the light switch. The forward searchlights flickered and eddied out long, brilliant streamers. It was astonishing how quickly the batteries charged—astonishing how efficient this machine was.

Craters sent earth and stone banging against the steel walls of the tractor bin. Conn could just hear them clank over the interminable roar of the engine. He braked a tread and sent the tractor in a long course through the wheat fields. It would make riding tougher for the Swasts.

They galloped on all sides, like swarms of furies. The horses were frightened at the horrible sound, and still the Swasts managed to dart in, fire their lances at the bin, and then pivot and gallop away. The Readers in the bin were firing rapidly. Swasts were vanishing from their saddles in blinding flares of light. The night was filled with roars.

Conn thought: Oh, hell, let's get it over with fast. Hilda's waiting. He drove his heels down to steady himself in the jiggling driver's seat,

managed to get another cigarette lit and began heaving bombs. They sounded like empty thumps in the open, but the flames they set off were real, and the dry wheat began to run with rivulets of fire.

He felt utterly dispassionate about it. He had the illusion that he was watching a stranger light the glass bottles of wholesale death and throw them. It seemed that these little groups of armed riders that were torn into screaming bloody bits were toy figures. It seemed that someone was hammering on his back.

Someone was—Bradley. His face was contorted with pain, but he continued to bang Conn's back. Conn shouted: "Is it all over?" and set his ears to Bradley's mouth.

"We've cleaned 'em out," Bradley screamed, "but that's not it. You've got to stop throwing those bombs. You've started a landslip."

Conn stared around. There were no more Swasts in sight. He threw the clutch and let the Diesel idle. He listened and stared. Then he caught it. The growling shake of earth underneath. It made him feel sick.

"That snub-nose warned me," he said. "The mining chief. He said this area is one big honeycombed fault. And I don't suppose your tunneling did anything to strengthen it."

FIRST Conn thought of the cavern and felt nauseous. There were hundreds of Readers down there, but he remembered Rollins and Wilder and the other technicians. They'd realize in time. They'd get everyone out. Besides, all the land was theirs now. They could build anew in the sun and open air.

He knew he was trying to put the hill in the back of his mind. The fear was gripping him. The hill was a granite outcropping. It would be

the first to crash away under the strain. There wouldn't be any more time machine. He would never see Hilda again.

Bradley screamed: "The cavern might hold and it might not. We've got to get there!"

Conn gritted: "No!" He threw in the clutch again. The Diesel howled and he turned the machine in starts and drove headlong for the hill. Wheat swished and the tractor banged into hollows and mounted the rolling rises. Behind him, Conn heard Bradley curse and bellow questions. He ignored him.

As the hill came into sight, Conn sensed heat on his back. He turned and suddenly realized what Bradley had been cursing about. Acres of dry wheat were aflame. A curtain of red-orange, topped by a thick, oily smoke cloud was marching after them. Then the jerk of the tractor as it began to mount the hill recalled his attention. He eased it up to the crest and let the motor idle again. The Readers leaped out of the bin.

"What the hell, Conn!" yelled Bradley. "Are you mad?"

Conn paid no attention. He bent and uncovered the stud bank. The earth was shuddering underfoot. Fire and earthquake and a war, that's what he was going through for Hilda. But it was worth it.

"Are you mad?" Bradley repeated.

"No," Conn said. "Look, Brad, I've got to recharge my batteries and get back in time before this landslip crushes the machine. Will you help me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Conn said: "I explained all that to Rollins. Listen, Brad, this means life to me. I couldn't be happy in your world. I've got to get back to where I belong. Just help me for ten minutes. That's all I ask."

Bradley said: "Ten minutes. That's all I can spare, Conn. We'll be needed in the cavern."

"Fine." Conn pointed to the tractor. "Get her jacked up on boulders or something and smash off the treads—"

He pressed the studs in combination. The disk of rubble sank down, carrying him with it. The walls of the shaft were ominously cracked, and as he neared the chamber entrance he could hear the steel squealing.

He thrust open the door. The batteries were exhausted so he could get no light. Conn fumbled in the spare-parts cabinet and withdrew a coil of insulated wire. He made quick connections to the battery terminals, unreeled the wire and started the disk upward, paying out the wire as he arose.

BRADLEY and his men had gotten the tractor up on boulders and were hammering off the treads. Conn removed his belt, squirmed under the machine and belted the forward drive axle to the generator. This way, he figured, he'd get double the power in half the time. The generator might burn out. Then again it might not. This was a terrific tractor. Conn yanked the generator leads off the storage batteries and connected them to the wires from his own batteries.

He threw in the clutch. The Diesel roared and set the axle into a spinning whine. Conn prayed the vibrations wouldn't throw the tractor over on her side before his batteries were charged. He leaped to the disk and sent it down.

The accumulator needle had already drifted away from the red exhaustion point and was creeping along the dial. Overhead Conn heard Bradley shout. He stepped

out on the disk and looked up. Bradley's head was a black dot in the shaft mouth.

"Fire's almost reached us, Conn!" he shouted.

Conn felt the earth rumble again. Suddenly he realized that Bradley had his own troubles, too.

"O. K., Brad," he called. "Don't need you any more. Get about your own business. My regards to Rollins and the rest. Good luck—"

"Good luck, Conn!" Yet Bradley lingered.

"Go on," Conn laughed, "get out of this. Oh, and by the way—I left my sack of bombs up there. Fair exchange. Heave me down one of those lances, will you? Nineteen forty-one could use them—"

The lance slithered down. Conn managed to cradle it in his arms. He looked up at Bradley and had a mighty desire to shake hands with the man—with his whole fighting generation. But there was a fifty-foot gap between them; a thousand-year gap between them.

Conn said: "Will you get out of here!"

"All right," Bradley said. "So long. I wish you'd stay with us. We could use your guts—"

Then he was gone. Conn brought the lance inside and placed it on the platform. He set the controls for April, 1941. Then he looked at the accumulator dial. The needle had crept far up. It wouldn't take long now.

Maybe a thousand watts or so were pouring into his batteries. Maybe more. Whether or not he got back to Hilda would depend on how long it took before the fire reached the tractor and fused everything, or how long it took before this hill settled down a few feet and washed him flat. He listened to the far-off drone of the Diesel and

prayed. He listened to the creak and groan of rock on steel and prayed.

A whiff of smoke reached his nostrils. Conn stood at the chamber door, wailing until the last minute before he would be forced to send the disk up. He was quivering with fear. He tried to think of anything to distract himself. He thought: Those Readers. With Uranium 237 they've stumbled closer to atomic power than we did in all the glory of our mechanized society.

He thought: America can use these blast lances. That'll be another factor added to the past from the future—and it'll create still another infinity of alternative futures.

Conn coughed and realized that the shaft was heavy with smoke. Above him he heard a rumble, as though a heavy machine was starting to roll down the hill. As if by magic, the ends of the wire sputtered away from the terminals and whipped up the shaft, carried away by the tractor. He sent the disk up after them, thinking stupidly: That's the way a fishing line looks to a fish. He shut the door.

Conn stepped up on the platform, afraid to look at the accumulator dial. He might have as much or twice as much power as he'd need, but he'd

have to push back through Time, no matter what. If he fell short of '41 in this track, he'd come out into the Dark Ages again, and be stuck for eternity. There'd be neither electricity nor the chance to create any.

He picked up the lance and reached for the knife switch. It was, he thought, like jumping blindfolded into an unknown vastly more terrifying than mere infinity.

He yanked down the switch.

VIII.

THE silver-apple moon had slipped back toward the eastern horizon when Conn at last came to the surface. It was blood-red and vast. The sky around it was steel-blue. He leaned on the lance he had brought with him and felt sick and weary.

The distant crack of a shot made him prick his ears. Conn stamped the thick turf carefully over the stud bank and went loping down the side of the hill. All this seemed like a bad dream he'd had once before—but he had an idea, a most peculiar idea.

He pushed through the high weeds at the foot of the hill and found himself at the edge of a lush fairway. A hundred yards before him, Conn saw the slight mound of a green. A

flag whipped above it. Far beyond the mound he saw a small group of figures. Seven figures. They split up and began to creep in his direction. Suddenly Conn understood.

He got to all-fours and began worming forward through the turf. A spike of red flame flared and cracked. From the sand pit, just before the green, came an answering shot. The seven figures poised and began to run. At the sand pit the dark form of a man clambered up. He fired twice and then dove back into the cover. The figures continued to sprint forward.

Conn murmured: "Take it easy, Probable Conn. I'm with you—"

He got to one knee, threw up the lance and pressed the firing stud. There were five silent flares of light. Craters appeared in the grass—and only two of the Nazi attackers were left.

Conn sighed and walked over to the edge of the green. He lay down easily and prepared to wait. It would only take a few minutes, he knew. The Probable Conn would lay out the two last Nazis, kiss Hilda, get slapped and say good-by. He might even see him walking away through the gloom.

He would walk up to the time machine, Conn thought, and surge forward into still another alternative future. Maybe he'd be happy there—maybe not. Maybe he'd try to come back, too. There was no tell-

ing. There was no sense wondering what he had in store for him because Time was too infinite for the human mind to comprehend.

There would be a lot to explain to Hilda, Conn thought. Why he'd left her? Why he'd returned so quickly? How he came to have his clothes torn to shreds? Where he got this lance? All this and more. But it wasn't important. Hilda was the only thing that was important and she'd understand.

A figure walked past him, trodding sadly through the moist turf; the figure of a Probable Conn with a rucksack on his shoulder. Conn wanted to get up and say: "Hi!" and maybe go over and shake hands; but the figure passed after a lingering look back, and, anyway, Conn heard Hilda cry: "David!"

That was his cue. He got to his feet and ran toward her. When she saw him she cried out again in a joyous tone: "David!"

Conn took Hilda in his arms and kissed her. He kept murmuring: "It's all right, darling, it's all right." And the thought came to him that this was the last paragraph for real. Nothing else came after this but "They lived happily ever after" and "The End." He nestled his bruised cheek against her silky hair and felt sorry for all the infinity of Probable Conns. He wondered how many of them knew what they were missing.

THE END.

