

The Man Outside

By

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Freeditorial 

Nobody in the neighborhood was surprised when Martin's mother disappeared and Ninian came to take care of him. Mothers had a way of disappearing around those parts and the kids were often better off without them. Martin was no exception. He'd never had it this good while he was living with his old lady. As for his father, Martin had never had one. He'd been a war baby, born of one of the tides of soldiers—enemies and allies, both—that had engulfed the country in successive waves and bought or taken the women. So there was no trouble that way.

Sometimes he wondered who Ninian really was. Obviously that story about her coming from the future was just a gag. Besides, if she really was his great-great-grand-daughter, as she said, why would she tell him to call her "Aunt Ninian"? Maybe he was only eleven, but he'd been around and he knew just what the score was. At first he'd thought maybe she was some new kind of social worker, but she acted a little too crazy for that.

He loved to bait her, as he had loved to bait his mother. It was safer with Ninian, though, because when he pushed her too far, she would cry instead of mopping up the floor with him.

"But I can't understand," he would say, keeping his face straight. "Why do you have to come from the future to protect me against your cousin Conrad?"

"Because he's coming to kill you."

"Why should he kill me? I ain't done him nothing."

Ninian sighed. "He's dissatisfied with the current social order and killing you is part of an elaborate plan he's formulated to change it. You wouldn't understand."

"You're damn right. I don't understand. What's it all about in straight gas?"

"Oh, just don't ask any questions," Ninian said petulantly. "When you get older, someone will explain the whole thing to you."

So Martin held his peace, because, on the whole, he liked things the way they were. Ninian really was the limit, though. All the people he knew lived in scabrous tenement apartments like his, but she seemed to think it was disgusting.

"So if you don't like it, clean it up," he suggested.

She looked at him as if he were out of his mind.

"Hire a maid, then!" he jeered.

And darned if that dope didn't go out and get a woman to come clean up the place! He was so embarrassed, he didn't even dare show his face in the

streets—especially with the women buttonholing him and demanding to know what gave. They tried talking to Ninian, but she certainly knew how to give them the cold shoulder.

One day the truant officer came to ask why Martin hadn't been coming to school. Very few of the neighborhood kids attended classes very regularly, so this was just routine. But Ninian didn't know that and she went into a real tizzy, babbling that Martin had been sick and would make up the work. Martin nearly did get sick from laughing so hard inside.

But he laughed out of the other side of his mouth when she went out and hired a private tutor for him. A tutor—in that neighborhood! Martin had to beat up every kid on the block before he could walk a step without hearing "Fancy Pants!" yelled after him.

Ninian worried all the time. It wasn't that she cared what these people thought of her, for she made no secret of regarding them as little better than animals, but she was shy of attracting attention. There were an awful lot of people in that neighborhood who felt exactly the same way, only she didn't know that, either. She was really pretty dumb, Martin thought, for all her fancy lingo.

"It's so hard to think these things out without any prior practical application to go by," she told him.

He nodded, knowing what she meant was that everything was coming out wrong. But he didn't try to help her; he just watched to see what she'd do next. Already he had begun to assume the detached role of a spectator.

When it became clear that his mother was never going to show up again, Ninian bought one of those smallish, almost identical houses that mushroom on the fringes of a city after every war, particularly where intensive bombing has created a number of desirable building sites.

"This is a much better neighborhood for a boy to grow up in," she declared. "Besides, it's easier to keep an eye on you here."

And keep an eye on him she did—she or a rather foppish young man who came to stay with them occasionally. Martin was told to call him Uncle Raymond.

From time to time, there were other visitors—Uncles Ives and Bartholomew and Olaf, Aunts Otilie and Grania and Lalage, and many more—all cousins to one another, he was told, all descendants of his.

Martin was never left alone for a minute. He wasn't allowed to play with the other kids in the new neighborhood. Not that their parents would have let them, anyway. The adults obviously figured that if a one-car family hired

private tutors for their kid, there must be something pretty wrong with him. So Martin and Ninian were just as conspicuous as before. But he didn't tip her off. She was grown up; she was supposed to know better than he did.

He lived well. He had food to eat that he'd never dreamed of before, warm clothes that no one had ever worn before him. He was surrounded by more luxury than he knew what to do with.

The furniture was the latest New Grand Rapids African modern. There were tidy, colorful Picasso and Braque prints on the walls. And every inch of the floor was modestly covered by carpeting, though the walls were mostly unabashed glass. There were hot water and heat all the time and a freezer well stocked with food—somewhat erratically chosen, for Ninian didn't know much about meals.

The non-glass part of the house was of neat, natural-toned wood, with a neat green lawn in front and a neat parti-colored garden in back.

Martin missed the old neighborhood, though. He missed having other kids to play with. He even missed his mother. Sure, she hadn't given him enough to eat and she'd beaten him up so hard sometimes that she'd nearly killed him—but then there had also been times when she'd hugged and kissed him and soaked his collar with her tears. She'd done all she could for him, supporting him in the only way she knew how—and if respectable society didn't like it, the hell with respectable society.

From Ninian and her cousins, there was only an impersonal kindness. They made no bones about the fact that they were there only to carry out a rather unpleasant duty. Though they were in the house with him, in their minds and in their talk they were living in another world—a world of warmth and peace and plenty where nobody worked, except in the government service or the essential professions. And they seemed to think even that kind of job was pretty low-class, though better than actually doing anything with the hands.

In their world, Martin came to understand, nobody worked with hands; everything was done by machinery. All the people ever did was wear pretty clothes and have good times and eat all they wanted. There was no devastation, no war, no unhappiness, none of the concomitants of normal living.

It was then that Martin began to realize that either the whole lot of them were insane, or what Ninian had told him at first was the truth. They came from the future.

When Martin was sixteen, Raymond took him aside for the talk Ninian had promised five years before.

"The whole thing's all my brother Conrad's fault. You see, he's an idealist," Raymond explained, pronouncing the last word with distaste.

Martin nodded gravely. He was a quiet boy now, his brief past a dim and rather ridiculous memory. Who could ever imagine him robbing a grocery store or wielding a broken bottle now? He still was rather undersized and he'd read so much that he'd weakened his eyes and had to wear glasses. His face was pallid, because he spent little time in the sun, and his speech rather overbred, his mentors from the future having carefully eradicated all current vulgarities.

"And Conrad really got upset over the way Earth has been exploiting the not so intelligent life-forms on the other planets," Raymond continued. "Which is distressing—though, of course, it's not as if they were people. Besides, the government has been talking about passing laws to do away with the—well, abuses and things like that, and I'm sure someday everything will come out all right. However, Conrad is so impatient."

"I thought, in your world, machines did all the work," Martin suggested.

"I've told you—our world is precisely the same as this one!" Raymond snapped. "We just come a couple of centuries or so later, that's all. But remember, our interests are identical. We're virtually the same people ... although it is amazing what a difference two hundred odd years of progress and polish can make in a species, isn't it?"

He continued more mildly: "However, even you ought to be able to understand that we can't make machinery without metal. We need food. All that sort of thing comes from the out-system planets. And, on those worlds, it's far cheaper to use native labor than to ship out all that expensive machinery. After all, if we didn't give the natives jobs, how would they manage to live?"

"How did they live before? Come to think of it, if you don't work, how do you live now?... I don't mean in the now for me, but the now for you," Martin explained laboriously. It was so difficult to live in the past and think in the future.

"I'm trying to talk to you as if you were an adult," Raymond said, "but if you will persist in these childish interruptions—"

"I'm sorry," Martin said.

But he wasn't, for by now he had little respect left for any of his descendants. They were all exceedingly handsome and cultivated young people, with superior educations, smooth ways of speaking and considerable self-confidence, but they just weren't very bright. And he had discovered that Raymond was perhaps the most intelligent of the lot. Somewhere in that

relatively short span of time, his line or—more frightening—his race had lost something vital.

Unaware of the near-contempt in which his young ancestor held him, Raymond went on blandly: "Anyhow, Conrad took it upon himself to feel particularly guilty, because, he decided, if it hadn't been for the fact that our great-grandfather discovered the super-drive, we might never have reached the stars. Which is ridiculous—his feeling guilty, I mean. Perhaps a great-grandfather is responsible for his great-grandchildren, but a great-grandchild can hardly be held accountable for his great-grandfather."

"How about a great-great-grandchild?" Martin couldn't help asking.

Raymond flushed a delicate pink. "Do you want to hear the rest of this or don't you?"

"Oh, I do!" Martin said. He had pieced the whole thing together for himself long since, but he wanted to hear how Raymond would put it.

"Unfortunately, Professor Farkas has just perfected the time transmitter. Those government scientists are so infernally officious—always inventing such senseless things. It's supposed to be hush-hush, but you know how news will leak out when one is always desperate for a fresh topic of conversation."

Anyhow, Raymond went on to explain, Conrad had bribed one of Farkas' assistants for a set of the plans. Conrad's idea had been to go back in time and "eliminate!" their common great-grandfather. In that way, there would be no space-drive, and, hence, the Terrestrials would never get to the other planets and oppress the local aborigines.

"Sounds like a good way of dealing with the problem," Martin observed.

Raymond looked annoyed. "It's the adolescent way," he said, "to do away with it, rather than find a solution. Would you destroy a whole society in order to root out a single injustice?"

"Not if it were a good one otherwise."

"Well, there's your answer. Conrad got the apparatus built, or perhaps he built it himself. One doesn't inquire too closely into such matters. But when it came to the point, Conrad couldn't bear the idea of eliminating our great-grandfather—because our great-grandfather was such a good man, you know." Raymond's expressive upper lip curled. "So Conrad decided to go further back still and get rid of his great-grandfather's father—who'd been, by all accounts, a pretty worthless character."

"That would be me, I suppose," Martin said quietly.

Raymond turned a deep rose. "Well, doesn't that just go to prove you

mustn't believe everything you hear?" The next sentence tumbled out in a rush. "I wormed the whole thing out of him and all of us—the other cousins and me—held a council of war, as it were, and we decided it was our moral duty to go back in time ourselves and protect you." He beamed at Martin.

The boy smiled slowly. "Of course. You had to. If Conrad succeeded in eliminating me, then none of you would exist, would you?"

Raymond frowned. Then he shrugged cheerfully. "Well, you didn't really suppose we were going to all this trouble and expense out of sheer altruism, did you?" he asked, turning on the charm which all the cousins possessed to a consternating degree.

Martin had, of course, no illusions on that score; he had learned long ago that nobody did anything for nothing. But saying so was unwise.

"We bribed another set of plans out of another of the professor's assistants," Raymond continued, as if Martin had answered, "and—ah—induced a handicraft enthusiast to build the gadget for us."

Induced, Martin knew, could have meant anything from blackmail to the use of the iron maiden.

"Then we were all ready to forestall Conrad. If one of us guarded you night and day, he would never be able to carry out his plot. So we made our counter-plan, set the machine as far back as it would go—and here we are!"

"I see," Martin said.

Raymond didn't seem to think he really did. "After all," he pointed out defensively, "whatever our motives, it has turned into a good thing for you. Nice home, cultured companions, all the contemporary conveniences, plus some handy anachronisms—I don't see what more you could ask for. You're getting the best of all possible worlds. Of course Ninian was a ninny to locate in a mercantile suburb where any little thing out of the way will cause talk. How thankful I am that our era has completely disposed of the mercantiles—"

"What did you do with them?" Martin asked.

But Raymond rushed on: "Soon as Ninian goes and I'm in full charge, we'll get a more isolated place and run it on a far grander scale. Ostentation—that's the way to live here and now; the richer you are, the more eccentricity you can get away with. And," he added, "I might as well be as comfortable as possible while I suffer through this wretched historical stint."

"So Ninian's going," said Martin, wondering why the news made him feel curiously desolate. Because, although he supposed he liked her in a remote kind of way, he had no fondness for her—or she, he knew, for him.

"Well, five years is rather a long stretch for any girl to spend in exile," Raymond explained, "even though our life spans are a bit longer than yours. Besides, you're getting too old now to be under petticoat government." He looked inquisitively at Martin. "You're not going to go all weepy and make a scene when she leaves, are you?"

"No...." Martin said hesitantly. "Oh, I suppose I will miss her. But we aren't very close, so it won't make a real difference." That was the sad part: he already knew it wouldn't make a difference.

Raymond clapped him on the shoulder. "I knew you weren't a sloppy sentimentalist like Conrad. Though you do have rather a look of him, you know."

Suddenly that seemed to make Conrad real. Martin felt a vague stirring of alarm. He kept his voice composed, however. "How do you plan to protect me when he comes?"

"Well, each one of us is armed to the teeth, of course," Raymond said with modest pride, displaying something that looked like a child's combination spaceman's gun and death ray, but which, Martin had no doubt, was a perfectly genuine—and lethal—weapon. "And we've got a rather elaborate burglar alarm system."

Martin inspected the system and made one or two changes in the wiring which, he felt, would increase its efficiency. But still he was dubious. "Maybe it'll work on someone coming from outside this house, but do you think it will work on someone coming from outside this time?"

"Never fear it has a temporal radius," Raymond replied. "Factory guarantee and all that."

"Just to be on the safe side," Martin said, "I think I'd better have one of those guns, too."

"A splendid idea!" enthused Raymond. "I was just about to think of that myself!"

When it came time for the parting, it was Ninian who cried—tears at her own inadequacy, Martin knew, not of sorrow. He was getting skillful at understanding his descendants, far better than they at understanding him. But then they never really tried. Ninian kissed him wetly on the cheek and said she was sure everything would work out all right and that she'd come see him again. She never did, though, except at the very last.

Raymond and Martin moved into a luxurious mansion in a remote area. The site proved a well-chosen one; when the Second Atomic War came, half a dozen years later, they weren't touched. Martin was never sure whether this

had been sheer luck or expert planning. Probably luck, because his descendants were exceedingly inept planners.

Few people in the world then could afford to live as stylishly as Martin and his guardian. The place not only contained every possible convenience and gadget but was crammed with bibelots and antiques, carefully chosen by Raymond and disputed by Martin, for, to the man from the future, all available artifacts were antiques. Otherwise, Martin accepted his new surroundings. His sense of wonder had become dulled by now and the pink pseudo-Spanish castle—"architecturally dreadful, of course," Raymond had said, "but so hilariously typical"—impressed him far less than had the suburban split-level aquarium.

"How about a moat?" Martin suggested when they first came. "It seems to go with a castle."

"Do you think a moat could stop Conrad?" Raymond asked, amused.

"No," Martin smiled, feeling rather silly, "but it would make the place seem safer somehow."

The threat of Conrad was beginning to make him grow more and more nervous. He got Raymond's permission to take two suits of armor that stood in the front hall and present them to a local museum, because several times he fancied he saw them move. He also became an adept with the ray gun and changed the surrounding landscape quite a bit with it, until Raymond warned that this might lead Conrad to them.

During those early years, Martin's tutors were exchanged for the higher-degreed ones that were now needful. The question inevitably arose of what the youth's vocation in that life was going to be. At least twenty of the cousins came back through time to hold one of their vigorous family councils. Martin was still young enough to enjoy such occasions, finding them vastly superior to all other forms of entertainment.

"This sort of problem wouldn't arise in our day, Martin," Raymond commented as he took his place at the head of the table, "because, unless one specifically feels a call to some profession or other, one just—well, drifts along happily."

"Ours is a wonderful world," Grania sighed at Martin. "I only wish we could take you there. I'm sure you would like it."

"Don't be a fool, Grania!" Raymond snapped. "Well, Martin, have you made up your mind what you want to be?"

Martin affected to think. "A physicist," he said, not without malice. "Or perhaps an engineer."

There was a loud, excited chorus of dissent. He chuckled inwardly.

"Can't do that," Ives said. "Might pick up some concepts from us. Don't know how; none of us knows a thing about science. But it could happen. Subconscious osmosis, if there is such a thing. That way, you might invent something ahead of time. And the fellow we got the plans from particularly cautioned us against that. Changing history. Dangerous."

"Might mess up our time frightfully," Bartholomew contributed, "though, to be perfectly frank, I can't quite understand how."

"I am not going to sit down and explain the whole thing to you all over again, Bart!" Raymond said impatiently. "Well, Martin?"

"What would you suggest?" Martin asked.

"How about becoming a painter? Art is eternal. And quite gentlemanly. Besides, artists are always expected to be either behind or ahead of their times."

"Furthermore," Otilie added, "one more artist couldn't make much difference in history. There were so many of them all through the ages."

Martin couldn't hold back his question. "What was I, actually, in that other time?"

There was a chilly silence.

"Let's not talk about it, dear," Lalage finally said. "Let's just be thankful we've saved you from that!"

So drawing teachers were engaged and Martin became a very competent second-rate artist. He knew he would never be able to achieve first rank because, even though he was still so young, his work was almost purely intellectual. The only emotion he seemed able to feel was fear—the ever-present fear that someday he would turn a corridor and walk into a man who looked like him—a man who wanted to kill him for the sake of an ideal.

But the fear did not show in Martin's pictures. They were pretty pictures.

Cousin Ives—now that Martin was older, he was told to call the descendant's cousin—next assumed guardianship. Ives took his responsibilities more seriously than the others did. He even arranged to have Martin's work shown at an art gallery. The paintings received critical approval, but failed to evoke any enthusiasm. The modest sale they enjoyed was mostly to interior decorators. Museums were not interested.

"Takes time," Ives tried to reassure him. "One day they'll be buying your pictures, Martin. Wait and see."

Ives was the only one of the descendants who seemed to think of Martin as an individual. When his efforts to make contact with the other young man failed, he got worried and decided that what Martin needed was a change of air and scenery.

"Course you can't go on the Grand Tour. Your son hasn't invented space travel yet. But we can go see this world. What's left of it. Tourists always like ruins best, anyway."

So he drew on the family's vast future resources and bought a yacht, which Martin christened *The Interregnum*. They traveled about from sea to ocean and from ocean to sea, touching at various ports and making trips inland. Martin saw the civilized world—mostly in fragments; the nearly intact semi-civilized world and the uncivilized world, much the same as it had been for centuries. It was like visiting an enormous museum; he couldn't seem to identify with his own time any more.

The other cousins appeared to find the yacht a congenial head-quarters, largely because they could spend so much time far away from the contemporary inhabitants of the planet and relax and be themselves. So they never moved back to land. Martin spent the rest of his life on *The Interregnum*. He felt curiously safer from Conrad there, although there was no valid reason why an ocean should stop a traveler through time.

More cousins were in residence at once than ever before, because they came for the ocean voyage. They spent most of their time aboard ship, giving each other parties and playing an avant-garde form of shuffleboard and gambling on future sporting events. That last usually ended in a brawl, because one cousin was sure to accuse another of having got advance information about the results.

Martin didn't care much for their company and associated with them only when not to have done so would have been palpably rude. And, though they were gregarious young people for the most part, they didn't court his society. He suspected that he made them feel uncomfortable.

He rather liked Ives, though. Sometimes the two of them would be alone together; then Ives would tell Martin of the future world he had come from. The picture drawn by Raymond and Ninian had not been entirely accurate, Ives admitted. True, there was no war or poverty on Earth proper, but that was because there were only a couple of million people left on the planet. It was an enclave for the highly privileged, highly interbred aristocracy, to which Martin's descendants belonged by virtue of their distinguished ancestry.

"Rather feudal, isn't it?" Martin asked.

Ives agreed, adding that the system had, however, been deliberately

planned, rather than the result of haphazard natural development. Everything potentially unpleasant, like the mercantiles, had been deported.

"Not only natives livin' on the other worlds," Ives said as the two of them stood at the ship's rail, surrounded by the limitless expanse of some ocean or other. "People, too. Mostly lower classes, except for officials and things. With wars and want and suffering," he added regretfully, "same as in your day.... Like now, I mean," he corrected himself. "Maybe it is worse, the way Conrad thinks. More planets for us to make trouble on. Three that were habitable aren't any more. Bombed. Very thorough job."

"Oh," Martin murmured, trying to sound shocked, horrified—interested, even.

"Sometimes I'm not altogether sure Conrad was wrong," Ives said, after a pause. "Tried to keep us from getting to the stars, hurting the people—I expect you could call them people—there. Still—" he smiled shamefacedly—"couldn't stand by and see my own way of life destroyed, could I?"

"I suppose not," Martin said.

"Would take moral courage. I don't have it. None of us does, except Conrad, and even he—" Ives looked out over the sea. "Must be a better way out than Conrad's," he said without conviction. "And everything will work out all right in the end. Bound to. No sense to—to anything, if it doesn't." He glanced wistfully at Martin.

"I hope so," said Martin. But he couldn't hope; he couldn't feel; he couldn't even seem to care.

During all this time, Conrad still did not put in an appearance. Martin had gotten to be such a crack shot with the ray pistol that he almost wished his descendant would show up, so there would be some excitement. But he didn't come. And Martin got to thinking....

He always felt that if any of the cousins could have come to realize the basic flaw in the elaborate plan they had concocted, it would have been Ives. However, when the yacht touched at Tierra del Fuego one bitter winter, Ives took a severe chill. They sent for a doctor from the future—one of the descendants who had been eccentric enough to take a medical degree—but he wasn't able to save Ives. The body was buried in the frozen ground at Ushuaia, on the southern tip of the continent, a hundred years or more before the date of his birth.

A great many of the cousins turned up at the simple ceremony. All were dressed in overwhelming black and showed a great deal of grief. Raymond read the burial service, because they didn't dare summon a clerical cousin from

the future; they were afraid he might prove rather stuffy about the entire undertaking.

"He died for all of us," Raymond concluded his funeral eulogy over Ives, "so his death was not in vain."

But Martin disagreed.

The ceaseless voyaging began again. The Interregnum voyaged to every ocean and every sea. Some were blue and some green and some dun. After a while, Martin couldn't tell one from another. Cousin after cousin came to watch over him and eventually they were as hard for him to tell apart as the different oceans.

All the cousins were young, for, though they came at different times in his life, they had all started out from the same time in theirs. Only the young ones had been included in the venture; they did not trust their elders.

As the years went by, Martin began to lose even his detached interest in the land and its doings. Although the yacht frequently touched port for fuel or supplies—it was more economical to purchase them in that era than to have them shipped from the future—he seldom went ashore, and then only at the urging of a newly assigned cousin anxious to see the sights. Most of the time Martin spent in watching the sea—and sometimes he painted it. There seemed to be a depth to his seascapes that his other work lacked.

When he was pressed by the current cousin to make a land visit somewhere, he decided to exhibit a few of his sea paintings. That way, he could fool himself into thinking that there was some purpose to this journey. He'd come to believe that perhaps what his life lacked was purpose, and for a while he kept looking for meaning everywhere, to the cousin's utter disgust.

"Eat, drink and be merry, or whatever you Romans say when you do as you do," the cousin—who was rather woolly in history; the descendants were scraping bottom now—advised.

Martin showed his work in Italy, so that the cousin could be disillusioned by the current crop of Romans. He found that neither purpose nor malice was enough; he was still immeasurably bored. However, a museum bought two of the paintings. Martin thought of Ives and felt an uncomfortable pang of a sensation he could no longer understand.

"Where do you suppose Conrad has been all this time?" Martin idly asked the current cousin—who was passing as his nephew by now.

The young man jumped, then glanced around him uncomfortably. "Conrad's a very shrewd fellow," he whispered. "He's biding his time—waiting until we're off guard. And then—pow!—he'll attack!"

"Oh, I see," Martin said.

He had often fancied that Conrad would prove to be the most stimulating member of the whole generation. But it seemed unlikely that he would ever have a chance for a conversation with the young man. More than one conversation, anyhow.

"When he does show up, I'll protect you," the cousin vowed, touching his ray gun. "You haven't a thing to worry about."

Martin smiled with all the charm he'd had nothing to do but acquire. "I have every confidence in you," he told his descendant. He himself had given up carrying a gun long ago.

There was a war in the Northern Hemisphere and so The Interregnum voyaged to southern waters. There was a war in the south and they hid out in the Arctic. All the nations became too drained of power—fuel and man and will—to fight, so there was a sterile peace for a long time. The Interregnum roamed the seas restlessly, with her load of passengers from the future, plus one bored and aging contemporary. She bore big guns now, because of the ever-present danger of pirates.

Perhaps it was the traditionally bracing effect of sea air—perhaps it was the sheltered life—but Martin lived to be a very old man. He was a hundred and four when his last illness came. It was a great relief when the family doctor, called in again from the future, said there was no hope. Martin didn't think he could have borne another year of life.

All the cousins gathered at the yacht to pay their last respects to their progenitor. He saw Ninian again, after all these years, and Raymond—all the others, dozens of them, thronging around his bed, spilling out of the cabin and into the passageways and out onto the deck, making their usual clamor, even though their voices were hushed.

Only Ives was missing. He'd been the lucky one, Martin knew. He had been spared the tragedy that was going to befall these blooming young people—all the same age as when Martin had last seen them and doomed never to grow any older. Underneath their masks of woe, he could see relief at the thought that at last they were going to be rid of their responsibility. And underneath Martin's death mask lay an impersonal pity for those poor, stupid descendants of his who had blundered so irretrievably.

There was only one face which Martin had never seen before. It wasn't a strange face, however, because Martin had seen one very like it in the looking glass when he was a young man.

"You must be Conrad," Martin called across the cabin in a voice that was

still clear. "I've been looking forward to meeting you for some time."

The other cousins whirled to face the newcomer.

"You're too late, Con," Raymond gloated for the whole generation. "He's lived out his life."

"But he hasn't lived out his life," Conrad contradicted. "He's lived out the life you created for him. And for yourselves, too."

For the first time, Martin saw compassion in the eyes of one of his lineage and found it vaguely disturbing. It didn't seem to belong there.

"Don't you realize even yet," Conrad went on, "that as soon as he goes, you'll go, too—present, past, future, wherever you are, you'll go up in the air like puffs of smoke?"

"What do you mean?" Ninian quavered, her soft, pretty face alarmed.

Martin answered Conrad's rueful smile, but left the explanations up to him. It was his show, after all.

"Because you will never have existed," Conrad said. "You have no right to existence; it was you yourselves who watched him all the time, so he didn't have a chance to lead a normal life, get married, have children...."

Most of the cousins gasped as the truth began to percolate through.

"I knew from the very beginning," Conrad finished, "that I didn't have to do anything at all. I just had to wait and you would destroy yourselves."

"I don't understand," Bartholomew protested, searching the faces of the cousins closest to him. "What does he mean, we have never existed? We're here, aren't we? What—"

"Shut up!" Raymond snapped. He turned on Martin. "You don't seem surprised."

The old man grinned. "I'm not. I figured it all out years ago."

At first, he had wondered what he should do. Would it be better to throw them into a futile panic by telling them or to do nothing? He had decided on the latter; that was the role they had assigned him—to watch and wait and keep out of things—and that was the role he would play.

"You knew all the time and you didn't tell us!" Raymond spluttered. "After we'd been so good to you, making a gentleman out of you instead of a criminal.... That's right," he snarled, "a criminal! An alcoholic, a thief, a derelict! How do you like that?"

"Sounds like a rich, full life," Martin said wistfully.

What an exciting existence they must have done him out of! But then, he couldn't help thinking, he—he and Conrad together, of course—had done them out of any kind of existence. It wasn't his responsibility, though; he had done nothing but let matters take whatever course was destined for them. If only he could be sure that it was the better course, perhaps he wouldn't feel that nagging sense of guilt inside him. Strange—where, in his hermetic life, could he possibly have developed such a queer thing as a conscience?

"Then we've wasted all this time," Ninian sobbed, "all this energy, all this money, for nothing!"

"But you were nothing to begin with," Martin told them. And then, after a pause, he added, "I only wish I could be sure there had been some purpose to this."

He didn't know whether it was approaching death that dimmed his sight, or whether the frightened crowd that pressed around him was growing shadowy.

"I wish I could feel that some good had been done in letting you be wiped out of existence," he went on voicing his thoughts. "But I know that the same thing that happened to your worlds and my world will happen all over again. To other people, in other times, but again. It's bound to happen. There isn't any hope for humanity."

One man couldn't really change the course of human history, he told himself. Two men, that was—one real, one a shadow.

Conrad came close to the old man's bed. He was almost transparent.

"No," he said, "there is hope. They didn't know the time transmitter works two ways. I used it for going into the past only once—just this once. But I've gone into the future with it many times. And—" he pressed Martin's hand—"believe me, what I did—what we did, you and I—serves a purpose. It will change things for the better. Everything is going to be all right."

Was Conrad telling him the truth, Martin wondered, or was he just giving the conventional reassurance to the dying? More than that, was he trying to convince himself that what he had done was the right thing? Every cousin had assured Martin that things were going to be all right.

Was Conrad actually different from the rest?

His plan had worked and the others' hadn't, but then all his plan had consisted of was doing nothing. That was all he and Martin had done ... nothing. Were they absolved of all responsibility merely because they had stood aside and taken advantage of the others' weaknesses?

"Why," Martin said to himself, "in a sense, it could be said that I have fulfilled my original destiny—that I am a criminal."

Well, it didn't matter; whatever happened, no one could hold him to blame. He held no stake in the future that was to come. It was other men's future—other men's problem. He died very peacefully then, and, since he was the only one left on the ship, there was nobody to bury him.

The unmanned yacht drifted about the seas for years and gave rise to many legends, none of them as unbelievable as the truth.

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