

The Count's Story: Part One

London, January 1891

1.

"Do you know Professor Edward Coplestone?" Oscar Wilde asked me, as he sipped appreciatively from his glass. It contained absinthe, which I had smuggled in from Paris for his delectation. We were dining at Roche's in Soho, but our host made no objection to the absinthe. *An Ideal Husband* had just started its run, to universal acclaim, and Wilde could do no wrong within those or any other walls.

I had been less than a month in London, and knew hardly anyone, so I denied it almost without thinking.

"He dines here sometimes," said Wilde, "but he cannot really be considered a member of our set. He is a great traveler, and tells extravagant tales of his adventures in parts of the world of which most of us have never heard. Some of his stories may even be true, although that hardly matters. He is the only man I know who can speak with casual familiarity about the hinterlands of Siberia and the Mongol lands."

That struck a chord. There was another man I knew who was widely travelled in the Far East, and liked to tell dubious traveler's tales. "Perhaps I *have* heard the name," I conceded, controlling the impulse to scowl that always assailed me when anything recalled the name of Arminius Vambery to my mind.

"You will find it extensively acknowledged in the notes and bibliographies of Tylor's *Primitive Culture* and Frazer's *Golden Bough*," said Wilde, airily—although I suspected that he had read neither book. "He is a self-supposed expert on primitive religion and magic, with particular reference to shamanistic cults, but he's by no means an academic Dryasdust. Quite a dreamer, in his way. No stranger to the opium dens of Limehouse, it's said—and rumor can usually be trusted...except, of course, when it turns its attention to me."

This news was mildly reassuring. It was entirely probable that such a man might know Arminius Vambery by repute, but Vambery was unlikely to have gone out of his way to pour out his troubled heart to a man reputed to be a dope-fiend. Like most sober madmen of impeccable reputation, Vambery had little tolerance of delusions born of conscious artifice, or of those accused of courting them. Vambery was the kind of man who trusted rumors—especially those he had invented himself.

"Why do you ask whether I know this Coplestone?" I asked.

"Because he has written me a curious letter saying that he has a very strange report to make and would be grateful for my presence. He goes on to say that he considers me one of the three most intelligent and open-minded men in London—I cannot imagine who else he has in mind—and that he would prize my opinion of what he has to say most highly. He requests me to bring an acquaintance as wise and as wide-eyed as myself. It is a description that could hardly apply to Bosie, or even to Robbie, so I naturally thought of you. Will you come with me, if you are not busy? The invitation is for tomorrow evening."

"You hardly know me," I murmured. "How do you know that I fit the requirements?" I was fully in agreement with the estimate of my intellectual acumen, but I suspected that Wilde had only *naturally thought of* me because I happened to be dining with him that evening.

"I was impressed the first time we met, in Paris," he said. "You seemed to have a view of the world of men so clear and so cynical that I could hardly believe you were part of that world. It is true that we have never talked at great length about deep matters, but I am always impulsive in my judgments and I am very rarely wrong. Will you come?"

I agreed to go with him. How could I possibly have refused? In any case, I was becoming hungry for new amusement. London seemed unbelievably dull after Paris, which I had left with such a sudden wrench. It is never a good idea for an individual of my kind to stay in one place for long, but I never regretted leaving a city more than I regretted leaving Paris. On the other hand, London was not entirely devoid of advantages. One could buy a slumgirl for a shilling, and a passably pretty one at that; we who are obliged by restless nature and the harassment of vile slanders to be forever on the move must be grateful for every opportunity which a city has to offer.

"Who else will be there?" I asked.

"I really have no idea. The only other name Coplestone mentions in his letter to me is Bram Stoker's—and that is only to say that Stoker is in Ireland just now, and cannot possibly come. Coplestone does not explain why he thinks Stoker might have been a suitable candidate for inclusion; personally, I have always considered his mind to be conspicuously second-rate."

I had laid down my fork rather abruptly at the first mention of Stoker's name. I had, in any case, only been toying with my food. I sipped a little water from my glass, but the attempt to cover up my reaction failed. Wilde must have seen my reaction immediately, and was wise enough to be surprised. He did not know me well, but he had observed that I rarely react intemperately to anything.

"Do you know Stoker at all?" he asked, curiously. "He's Henry Irving's factotum—his strong right arm, I suppose he would say."

"I have never met him," I said, in a neutral tone.

"I've seen little of him lately myself," said Wilde, "although I was a regular visitor to his home when he first moved to London. He was at Trinity before me, you know, and he was still working in Dublin when I went up. My father befriended him, and even my mother condescended to like him a little. He married a girl of whom I was exceedingly fond, and I was never able to forgive his temerity. The fact that we are now in rival camps, theatrically speaking, only serves to add new insult to the old injury."

I was not in the least interested in the petty politics of the English theater. I had heard far too much gossip about theatrical matters while staying with Jean Lorrain, and I had had my fill of paeans of praise offered up to the divinity of Sarah Bernhardt. I knew, though, that Stoker was one of the people Arminius Vambery had talked to when he was in London; Stoker had invited him to address a meeting of the Beefsteak Club, where he had waxed lyrical on the subject of vampirism. If Stoker and Coplestone were acquainted, it was possible that Coplestone might have been present. After what had happened in Paris, I wanted to steer well clear of anyone who might conceivably have occasion—with whatever motive—to mention the name of Laura Vambery. On the other hand, I had already accepted Wilde's invitation, and it seemed that Stoker would not actually be present. I thought it best to change the subject.

"Shall we share a carriage?" I asked. "I shall be happy to collect you, if you wish. Where does Coplestone live?"

"On the south side of the park—Regent's Park, that is, not Hyde Park. Yes, I'd be grateful if you could collect me from the Haymarket; it will be easier to tear myself away from my friends, my duties and my admirers if I know that I am impatiently awaited by a stern aristocrat. We are expected at eight. I do hope that it will be amusing. Travelers' tales have become far less interesting since Mungo Park and the indefatigable Stanley let so much dismal light into the delicately dark heart of Africa, and the steady march of geographical science is slowly strangling the spirit of wild romance—but if there is any forgotten corner of the globe still rich with gorgeous mystery, Ned Coplestone is more than likely to have found it. If he intends to test our credulity, we may be reasonably sure that it will be well and truly tested, perhaps to delicious destruction."

Even though I knew full well that there were more things in Heaven and Earth than were dreamt of in Oscar Wilde's philosophy, I did not think of myself as a gullible individual, and I was inclined to think that listening to a story that tested my credulity to destruction would be a waste of time—but I put my reservations firmly aside, and resolved to do my very best to play the part allocated to me: that of a man of the world, clear-sighted and open-minded.

I little suspected what unprecedented demands that role would make of me in the nights that followed.

2.

I called for Wilde at the appropriate hour but he was—as always—late. I had to sit in my carriage for a quarter of an hour, watching the crowds go by.

The famous London fog had condescended to leave the city unblanketed for once, and the frost had not yet begun to glitter upon the pavements. The chestnut-roasting season was well past by now and most of the brazier-men were hawking baked potatoes, whose odor was not quite so astringent. The crowd was as good a quality as one could expect to find in London out of season, but they seemed a tawdry gaggle by comparison with the excited throngs of Paris's Latin Quarter. My mood was such that they seemed more than usually like cattle trooping to the barn, or laying-hens milling about their carelessly-scattered corn. I was glad when Wilde finally consented to appear.

As we bowled along Regent Street, Wilde lost himself in some interminable anecdote, and for once his brilliance seemed slightly off-key, but he was in such good heart that he slowly roused me from my torpor of indolence. By the time we reached the fringes of the park I felt quite ready to face the challenge of the long winter night.

Inevitably, we were the last to arrive, although my coachman had contrived to make up some of the time we had lost by showing his usual scant regard for the convenience of other road-users.

Wilde's enthusiasm seemed to falter slightly when he saw the remainder of the company gathered in Coplestone's waiting-room. He doubtless wondered what judgments had been made of their intelligence by way of polite enticement. He introduced me to Coplestone, who—mercifully—showed no flicker of recognition at the mention of my name.

Copplestone was a tall, gaunt man who had doubtless been more solidly-built in his younger days, but who seemed to find the advancing years uncommonly burdensome. He was not unduly wrinkled, but his complexion seemed curiously jaundiced and his handshake was far from firm. Politeness forbade me from saying so but he really did not look well, and I wondered whether he ought to have postponed his story-telling until he had recovered more of his color and strength.

I had to concur with Wilde's unvoiced judgment that our fellow-guests did not appear at first glance to be a coterie of the most intelligent and open-minded men in England. They seemed, in fact, to comprise an assembly of eccentrics. I dare say, however, that there was more than one among them who felt that Wilde and I increased the bizarrerie of the gathering rather than adding a necessary counterweight of wise sobriety.

Wilde proved, once he had removed his coat, to be dressed as flamboyantly as usual, although the green carnation in his lapel was made of silk and crêpe paper. I, of course, was a foreigner—and a Count to boot—and needed no artificial aids to appear exotic in English eyes.

While Copplestone introduced me to the others I searched anxiously for any sign or symptom which might testify to the arrival in London of scurrilous gossip, but there was nothing. If any of them had heard of the Mourier affair they were models of discretion.

The first man to whom I was presented was a stout and stolid doctor who had served in India. He seemed a man of common sense rather than exceptional cleverness, but he was the only man present who seemed to have been long acquainted with Copplestone. Copplestone referred to him as an "invaluable supporter" but also as an "unwilling collaborator," and I gathered that the doctor had his own reservations about our host's physical condition.

Like Wilde, the doctor had been invited to bring a companion, and the man who accompanied him was tall and distinguished, though not particularly well-dressed. He seemed grave almost to the point of melancholy, and I was struck by the strange acuity of his grey eyes. Nothing was said concerning his station in life, but he greeted me politely.

I was then introduced to two young men, perhaps not yet out of their 20s. The first of them was a study in contradictions. He was not thin, but the peculiar softness of his flesh gave the impression that he had recently been very lean indeed, and was filling out for the first time. His complexion was naturally pale, but he pinked very easily, and a hectic flush seemed to be continually ebbing and flowing from his cheeks. There was a slight feverish glint in his eye, which suggested that he was not entirely well, although he was by no means as debilitated as our host. It was evident that Copplestone had never clapped eyes on him before, and that it was his companion to whom the professor had actually written.

The second young man could hardly have looked more different. He was dark and curly-haired, with perhaps a touch of Creole about him. Copplestone explained that he had but recently returned to London after spending some time as a schoolmaster in Derbyshire, but that Wilde knew him slightly and would doubtless be glad to see him again. Wilde obediently pantomimed the pleasure of an old acquaintance joyously renewed, but it did not seem to me that their friendship could have been very intimate. Wilde knew so many young men that he must have found it hard to remember their names.

I judged from snippets of conversation I barely had time to overhear that the two young men were not very well acquainted with one another, but that they had many interests in common. Both seemed to have studied medicine, or at least biological science, and both had apparently served as teachers before finally choosing to devote themselves to the precarious life of the pen.

There was only one man in the room who presented incontrovertible evidence to the naked eye that he was older than Copplestone; he seemed to be in his mid-60s, and his flowing beard was white, but he was still healthy. He was clearly a man of means, and also a man of science. I would presumably have recognized his name immediately had I been well versed in science, but science has always seemed to me to be very much a day-time product, and those who invariably keep late hours—as I do—tend to be thrust more often into the company of men of Wilde's or Jean Lorrain's stripe. This was the only man in the room with a title of any sort, but Copplestone did not say whether it was a baronetcy or a knighthood earned by public service; he did, however, mention that the old gentleman was as well-known for his exploits in association with the Society for Psychical Research as for more material work. This did not make me any more enthusiastic to cultivate his acquaintance.

The final member of the party, who had been brought as a companion by the white-haired man of science, was a dark-haired man of science. Copplestone seemed to think that we might get along famously together, presumably because we both had European accents, but it was obvious to the two of us, if to no one else, that we came from nations that had so little in common as never to have gone to war against one another. In any case, this mustachioed worthy candidly explained that he was an American by adoption, and had renounced his European identity in order to give his allegiance entirely to the American spirit of free enterprise. I was not sure exactly what this implied, but I gathered that it had something to do with the profits one could make out of the sale of patents.

I concluded, on due consideration, that although we comprised an exceedingly peculiar crew, we nevertheless constituted a team as well-qualified as any to pass judgment on an exotic and challenging report.

When I had the opportunity to stand aside for a few moments with Wilde he was quick to give me the benefit of his own judgment. "We can expect little in the way of ready wit from the men of science," he told me. "They will play their part very earnestly—but some such counterweight of sanity may be necessary, given that our remaining companions have no shortage of romance in their souls."

"Have you read the work of either of the young men?" I asked.

"Not a word. I have heard rumor of them both, and the more personable of the two has urged me more than once to look at some of his tales, but I never quite found the time. The one who blushes so hectically is said to have produced some very pretty fancies about the future evolution of the race and the probability of its extinction. He has studied Darwinism under Thomas Huxley, I believe, but he has absorbed the ideas without the rugged optimism of a Winwood Reade. The third literary man is far more famous than either. *Everyone* has read his work."

It was news to me that there was a third literary man present. "Are you talking about the grey-eyed man?" I asked.

"No—that is, not directly. I meant the doctor, who has published several novels and a long series of short stories in a periodical called *The Strand*. The stories chronicle the adventures of a consulting detective: a master of ratiocination, who solves puzzles by observing clues that less sensitive men invariably miss. The appearance, quirks and mannerisms of the detective in question are said to be very closely based on those of his grey-eyed companion. Like your friend Lorrain, who annoyed Guy de Maupassant by putting him into one of his novels, the doctor prefers to paint his pen-portraits from life.

"Unfortunately, the doctor's friend is said to have become so entranced with the doctor's literary confections as to have convinced himself that he really *is* a great detective. He is only recently returned from a rest-cure in Switzerland. Rumor has it that the cure was forced upon him by a breakdown which he suffered when the doctor—perhaps hoping to dispel his delusion—killed off the character a little over a year ago by sending him tumbling to his death over the Reichenbach Falls. Perhaps he is cured, but it is conceivable that he has convinced himself that the Great Detective is not dead after all and is merely in hiding, awaiting his chance to emerge from obscurity by solving a mystery deeper and more deadly than any he has ever faced before. Did you remark the strange glint in his eye?"

"I did. He certainly has a disconcerting stare—if he has the intelligence to go with it he must be a man to be reckoned with."

"It is more likely to be the effect of a new drug—not a derivative of opium, but something equally powerful. He is supposed to have broken the habit while he was away, but...some habits are hard to break. Has poor Lorrain given up drinking ether, by the way?"

"I believe he has," I reported. "I think he has had enough of physicians, for now, and is more disposed to place himself in the hands of a good surgeon. As you say, though, some habits are hard to break."

"I am interested to see that Coplestone has invited no clergyman, nor anyone of the legalistic turn of mind," Wilde said. "To my mind, that is evidence that he has an altogether sensible notion of trust and trustworthiness."

That was a judgment with which I concurred, but I did not have a chance to say so; we were already being ushered into the dining-room.

Coplestone had the grace to feed his guests well, and to lay out a burgundy of very tolerable vintage before setting forth to tax their credulity. I, as was my habit, ate very little and drank even less, but I made a polite show of participation in the pleasures of the meal. I had been seated between Wilde and the younger man of science, directly opposite the grey-eyed man, so I was not ideally placed for conversation. Fortunately, Wilde soon took charge of the occasion and held the entire company in thrall with anecdotes regarding the production of *An Ideal Husband*, the writing of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the appalling behavior of the Marquess of Queensberry.

It was not until the port was being passed that the professor introduced the serious business of the evening—by which time he seemed a little stronger than he had before the meal. I settled back in my oaken chair, ready and eager to be entertained—although I suspected that Wilde's might be a difficult act for him to follow.

I need not have worried. Despite the enormous difference in their styles, Edward Coplestone proved easily capable of putting on a fascinating show.

3.

"Some of you," Coplestone said, "will already know something about the studies that have been my life's work. Some of you may even have read one or other of my monographs on the religious rites and magical practices of various exotic tribes. We are inclined to call such tribes primitive, partly on account of the fact that

they indulge in un-Christian rites and un-scientific practices, but it has long been my opinion that our condescension is not entirely justified. In my admittedly-blasphemous view, Christianity has no more claim to truthfulness than any pagan faith, while modern science, in so savagely condemning the occult studies which not so long ago gave birth to it, has thrown out more than one baby with the bathwater.

"My published writings on tribal magic and divination have always been scrupulously skeptical—my reputation as a natural philosopher would have been reduced to tatters had they shown the least trace of credulity—but my private thoughts have ever been prepared to entertain hypotheses as to the shy truths which might lie hidden in the undergrowth of superstition. I have been particularly interested in the various means used by tribal magicians to obtain knowledge of the future.

"The history of prophecy is littered with ignominious failures—and the prophecies in which, as Christian men, we are supposed to invest our faith are as ignominious as any—but I have seen enough in my travels to convince me that there are indeed some men who have the innate gift of foresight, and that there are chemical methods by which such natural gifts may be enhanced. I have long thought it probable that the application of proper scientific method to the study of such men and such chemical compounds would rapidly produce a way of inducing more accurate and more far-reaching visions of futurity."

"A bold ambition," Wilde put in—but Coplestone only frowned, resentful of the interruption.

"A hopeless ambition," the American murmured, for my ears alone, "given the rapidity with which new technology is changing the spectrum of possibility."

"In saying this," Coplestone went on, insistently, "I remain well aware of certain philosophical problems that arise in connection with the notion of precognition, and of certain psychological problems that inevitably confuse the visionary process. I have no wish to insult the intelligence of men like yourselves by lecturing you, but I would like to comment very briefly on both these kinds of problems in order to prepare the ground for the story which I have to tell.

"Throughout my adult life, I have held firm to the belief that if the principles of causality that we have recognized since Newton's time are true, then the future must—at least in principle—be foreseeable and predictable. I have always taken it for granted that, if the future flows from the present by virtue of inviolable physical laws, it must do so according to a destiny that has been *mapped out*, as it were, since time immemorial. I take it for granted, too, that if the future really is mappable, then there must be a sense in which it already exists; if its shape is already fixed, then that shape must in some sense be *perceptible*, not in the uncertain fog of the speculative imagination, but in actuality. In the book of destiny, the moments making up the history of the universe must lie next to one another like slender leaves, each one ready for inspection, if only a man—or any other sentient creature—were somehow able to step outside the ordinary course of his own temporal procession."

The white-bearded man leaned forward at this point and opened his mouth to interrupt—to protest, I suppose, that there was a contradiction here, in that one could not simultaneously hold a belief in destiny and yet speak of creatures stepping outside it—but Coplestone held up a hand to forestall him.

"I am aware of the paradoxes implicit in the idea," said the professor, "and of the vicious circularity inherent in the supposition that a man may step outside the course of his destiny if, and only if, he is destined to do it. I was never satisfied with that, and have ever been impatient with the twists and turns of the labyrinth of pure conjecture. I always desired to make an experiment that might guide me to the heart of the philosophical maze. Rather than be content with demonstrating the impossibility of looking into the future *a priori*, I wanted to make the best effort I could actually to do it, so that I might have the leisure afterwards to examine the implications of what I had been able to do.

"It seemed to me, on the basis of my studies of drug-enhanced precognition in tribal societies, that these magicians sometimes did obtain true knowledge of the future, but were almost never able to profit from it. One reason for this, I perceived, was that any true knowledge they obtained was invariably alloyed with extraneous material, which frequently led to its misinterpretation. After long study, I concluded that the organ of foresight—the sixth sense, if you will admit the term—is that which engages in the ordinary business of dreaming, and that its sensory function is confused by other expressive functions linked to the passions. In brief, our usually-meager powers of precognition are so polluted, perverted and confused by our hopes, fears and fancies that it is normally impossible to separate truth from fantasy until the event that was dimly foreseen actually comes to pass, thus revealing the previously-hidden meaning of the precognitive vision."

I have heard all this before, I reflected. *It has been the substance of countless intoxicated debates in inns and coffee-houses. Can there really be anything new to add to it?* I glanced at the paler of the young men, and saw that he too had the look of one who had heard it all before. He seemed to find its repetition here and now a little annoying. I permitted myself a little smile; he had not yet learned the virtues of patience and relaxation. Were he lucky enough to live as long as I had, he would doubtless become less hectic of temperament.

Coplestone had not paused; he was fully in the grip of what seemed to me suspiciously like alcoholic eloquence. "It was evident to me from my extensive studies of shamanistic and related practices," he went on, "that the enhancement of visionary precognition by appropriate drugs could not entirely filter out this

psychological pollution, no matter how powerfully the compounds increased the power of the sensory function—but I hoped that it might at least be minimized, if the optimum combination of drugs could be found.

“Each of the tribes that I studied had to rely on the bounty of nature to supply enhancing drugs. The Siberians use agaric mushrooms, the Mexicans use *peyotl*, the Mongolians use opium derivatives. I, by contrast, had the double advantage of being able to collect and combine all these different kinds of compounds, and of being able to refine and modify them using the recently-evolved techniques of organic chemistry.

“This was what I set out to do: to discover the mechanics of a modern Delphic oracle, more powerful than any known to history. I set out to find the most reliable possible means of dividing the curtain that normally confines me within the sequence of my living moments, so that I might peer through the breach into the world which is to come. By this means, I hoped to discover, among other things, whether what I had long taken for granted was actually true: whether the future glimpsed by authentic seers is, in fact, an immutable future of destiny, which they are quite unable to affect in any way despite their foresight of it, or whether it is merely a future of contingency, which might yet be altered or averted if they were able to act upon their precognition.”

This time he did pause, and he rang a bell to summon the manservant who had single-handedly carried the food we had consumed from the kitchens, and had cleared the dishes after each course. Coplestone apparently had no other servants, except for an aged cook.

The servant must have been warned that the summons was imminent, for he immediately came in, carrying a large tray. On the tray was a wooden rack which held a series of test-tubes and glass-stoppered vials, and a large manila envelope. These items the servant carefully placed in front of the professor—who was, of course, seated at the head of the table.

“These,” said Coplestone, indicating the test-tubes, “are the various vision-enhancing drugs which were my raw materials.” He touched one of the sealed vials, which was marked out by a ring of red paint. “Here is the last and best of the many mixtures which I made from them. Needless to say, it is not a simple mixture, and the complex series of treatments to which I submitted the various compounds is carefully set out in a formula, which I have placed in this envelope.

“As you have doubtless observed, my experiments have taken their toll of my health, and I fear that I may have done myself irreparable damage in the course of the expeditions I intend to describe to you tonight. In order that my discoveries may be made available to other interested parties, I will give the formula to my good friend the doctor—and I will gladly give the remainder of the compound to any one of you who might care to volunteer to follow where I have led, in order to prove that what I have to tell you has at least some truth in it. There is enough for a single moderate dose, similar to the one I employed in the second of the three dream-journeys I shall describe to you.”

Coplestone gave the envelope to the doctor, in an appropriately ceremonious fashion. The doctor placed it dutifully in the inner pocket of his jacket.

“Perhaps, Doctor,” the professor said, “You would be kind enough to tell the others what you observed while you have attended me these last few days.

Our attention shifted to the doctor, who coughed rather gruffly. “I can only tell them what I saw, Coplestone,” he said. “Nothing else.”

“Nothing else is required, I assure you,” said Coplestone.

The doctor seemed uncomfortable, but he nodded his head. “I observed Professor Coplestone on three separate occasions,” he said, awkwardly. “On each occasion, I watched him inject the drug whose remnant you see in that vial into his arm, and I did not leave him until its effects had worn off.

“After taking the drug, Coplestone fell into a deep sleep, which quickly gave way to an unusual form of coma. His heartbeat slowed down to some 28beats per minute and his body temperature fell by some 12 or 14 degrees Fahrenheit. His body suffered a considerable but not-quite-consistent loss of weight, amounting to slightly less or slightly more than three stones, although its dimensions were not altered commensurately.”

“What a pity,” Wilde murmured. “Coplestone might otherwise have hawked his discovery as a convenient cure for obesity.”

The doctor spared him a brief frown, but continued doggedly: “This condition persisted for the same length of time—approximately three hours and ten minutes on each occasion—even though the professor increased the dosage at each stage of the experiment. As the end of each period approached, the professor’s body was subject to tremors, which increased considerably in violence over the course of the three experiments. On the third occasion, I was fearfully anxious lest the convulsions should cause his heart to stop. When the professor regained consciousness he was noticeably weak. His body did not recover all the weight which it had lost; the first coma resulted in a net loss of seven pounds, the second 10 and the third 16. It would be unwise in the extreme, in my opinion, for the professor to attempt any further experiments along these lines—and I must say that anyone who is prepared to give serious consideration to Coplestone’s invitation to continue this work must bear in mind that he might do himself considerable harm.”

The professor seemed quite unperturbed by this dark warning.

"Thank you, Doctor," he said. Then, addressing the whole company again, he continued: "I will not bore you with a lengthy account of my preliminary experiments, nor with any elaborate presentation of my discoveries in organic chemistry, fascinating though they are. As to the nature of the mechanism involved in the process of precognition, even I can only speculate. However, it may be worth bearing in mind that, although the locus of the individual mind is normally limited to the body at a particular moment in time, this does not mean that the mind has a particular location within the body. Sir William will, I think, bear me out when I say that there is now an abundance of evidence that the mind is capable of extending its function beyond the body, producing in the process what we normally call *apparitions*?"

The white-bearded man of science nodded his head. "The evidence for the survival of the mind after death, and its ability to formulate a fragile envelope for the purpose of earthly manifestation is now overwhelming," he agreed.

"Not all apparitions are vestiges of that post-mortem kind," said Coplestone, "as my story will demonstrate. The naturally-occurring compounds traditionally employed to induce visions are limited in scope, and the perceptions they permit are invariably distorted. However, such compounds do indeed allow the human mind to extend its perceptive range in both space and time. Space and time are, of course, merely two different aspects of the unitary fabric of the cosmos. Perception of any kind would be impossible without some kind of physical presence, so projections of this kind require the synthesis of a body of sorts, sometimes misleadingly called an *astral body*."

"The compound which I eventually refined and perfected increased the powers of the natural compounds very considerably. The range of achievable projection was increased, and—perhaps more importantly—the degree of conscious control which I was able to exercise over my remote manifestation was very greatly enhanced. After a few preliminary experiments, I was very eager to employ what I had begun to call my *time machine* in the exploration of the future of mankind."

"You don't care to tell us, I suppose," said the pale young man, rather rudely, "what will win the Derby this year?" He seemed curiously hostile, almost as if he had been insulted in some obscure fashion.

"Alas," said Coplestone, "my machine is so very powerful that it would require an impractical precision of dosage to travel 60 years, let alone six months, and I have reason to think that it would be impossible to remain in such a near future for more than a split second. In order to achieve a vision of reasonable coherency, and to take advantage of the conscious control which this compound allows, one must work in terms of thousands or tens of thousands of years."

"Not *hundreds* of thousands?" asked the young man, intemperately. Now that he was no longer schooling his speech so carefully his lower-class accent was discernible even to my untutored ears.

"The dosage required to journey as far as that might easily prove fatal," said Coplestone, whose equanimity was unconquerable by irony. "I did not dare to venture as far as that."

The young man scowled, and muttered something barely audible, which seemed to include the word *plagiarism*. His companion placed a soothing hand on his wrist, bidding him be patient and listen.

"My sketchy explanations have clearly strained your credulity too far, although my story has not yet even begun," said Coplestone, looking around at the uneasy faces which confronted him, "but I will press on regardless. Perhaps, though, some of you would also like to make preliminary statements about your opinions as to what I have said regarding the possible perceptibility of the future?"

I certainly did not, and felt uncomfortable to be asked, but some of my companions were not so shy.

"I don't believe in your damned native seers," said the American, brusquely, "and I don't believe in Sir William's apparitions either, although he's promised to show me a few while I'm here. I believe in causality, so I accept that certain aspects of the future might be foreseen, but we live in an era when new discoveries are changing the world with unparalleled rapidity, and we can't know today what we might discover tomorrow. Drug-induced dreams can't show us the shape of things to come."

"That's true," said the pale young man. "The future is subject to the determination of causality, and is hence potentially discoverable, at least to the extent that we can gather the relevant data, but it will need a better instrument than mere hallucination to calculate our future."

"I'm not so sure that there's anything *mere* about authentic visions," his curly-haired companion objected. "The origin of motion, which was the primal Act of Creation, must already have contained the plan of universal evolution—and the plan must still exist, in some form, within our bodies and our minds. It might well be accessible to the imagination, if only we could master the trick of it."

"But what of free will?" the British scientist put in, impatiently. "Men have the power to choose what they will do, and their choices determine the shape of their own futures. The future of mankind will be the sum of those choices, not the product of any merely mechanical laws. Consciousness is immune to the laws of causality that apply to inert objects. There are such things as premonitory dreams, I know—but we must consider them as warnings of what *might* happen, not as glimpses of something immutable that *already exists*."

"I agree with Sir William, at least about the freedom of the will," said the doctor, gruffly. "Even if human beings are part of some unfolding plan, they have the power to alter it. The future of mankind depends entirely

on the force and competence of the human will. We were not impelled here tonight by some irresistible force of necessity, and not one of us really doubts that he might be somewhere else entirely if it had pleased him to go.”

“Neither Milton nor Mill could find a contradiction there,” said Wilde, mildly. “Both would argue that our choices are real, and yet their outcomes would be known with perfect certainty to an omniscient mind. Yes, they would admit, we *do* have the power of choice—but the choices we make are determined by our powers of reason, our characters and our interests, and are therefore predictable. When our friends act unexpectedly, Mill says, we do not shrug our shoulders and attribute our surprise to the inevitable consequences of the freedom of the will—we simply conclude that we did not know them as well as we thought, and did not fully comprehend the causes of their actions.”

I noticed that Wilde did not offer an opinion of his own, but was content with introducing the relevant ideas of others. I also noticed that the doctor’s grey-eyed companion made no effort to intervene in the discussion, even when a momentary silence fell.

Copplestone turned to me, and said: “Do you have an opinion, Count?”

“I have an opinion of sorts,” I said, a little reluctantly. “I hold that there *is* an inescapable destiny that faces us all, and the universe itself: it is death. Perhaps we have the power to delay our course, or attain to the end by different routes, but in the final analysis, there is no other fact, no other absolute.”

I had always been a fatalist, and could not conceive that anything Copplestone might say would change my mind. How arrogant, how unimaginative and how wrong I was!

“Death is not the end,” said the pillar of the Society for Psychical Research. “That is proven; we need not doubt it.”

I saw the excitable young man shake his head vigorously, but for once he had discretion enough not raise his reedy voice in protest. Copplestone lifted a placatory hand.

“Enough, gentlemen,” he said. “Let us not fall to squabbling. When I have said what I have to say, you might be better informed to carry this argument forward—if you can believe my story.”

“Is there any reason why we should not?” asked the American, ironically. He, at least, seemed fully prepared to disbelieve it.

“Only that it is incredible,” said Copplestone, soberly. His tired eyes shone with reflected firelight, and he suddenly seemed to me to be extremely sad as well as debilitated—as if the world that had once been a comfortable home to him had turned traitor, and cast him into some private hell of unbelonging. I felt an altogether unaccustomed pang of sympathy, and looked down at the wine in my glass, which had not the power to intoxicate me.

“If it were not incredible,” said Wilde, pleasantly, “it would not be worth the ceremony. I am hoping for something very extraordinary indeed, Ned, and I trust that you will not disappoint us. As for myself, I am sufficiently realistic to be eager to believe anything, provided only that it is an obvious and grandiose lie.”

Copplestone had the grace to smile at this, although it could not have been the kind of support he wanted. “In that case,” he said, “I will proceed to describe the three expeditions I undertook while the faithful doctor patiently stood guard over my *residuum*.”