

THE HERTFORD MANUSCRIPT

by Richard Cowper

Cowper combines a high quality British literary style with a background of historical understanding—and thereby comes up with a sequel to "Wells' immortal Time Machine that stands on its own.

The death of my Great-Aunt Victoria at the advanced age of 93 topped off the longest branch of a family tree whose roots have been traced right back to the 15th Century—indeed, for those who are prepared to accept "Decressie" as a bonafide corruption of "de Crecy," well beyond that. Talking to my aunt towards the end of her life was rather like turning the pages of a Victorian family album, for as she grew older the England of her childhood seemed to glow ever more brightly in her mind's eye. In those far-off days it had been fashionable to accept the inevitability of human progress with a whole-heartedness which is almost impossible for us to imagine. In the 1990's life presented *Homo sapiens* with a series of "problems" which had to be "solved." It was as simple as that. The Edwardians merely gilded the roof of that towering pagoda of Victorian optimism which collapsed in smithereens in 1914.

James Wilkins—Great-Aunt Victoria's husband—died of trench fever in the Dardanelles in 1916. They had no children and she never married again. I learnt later from my aunt that James had been a keen member of the Fabian Society. He had also been an active partner in the antiquarian book business of Benham & Wilkins which owned premises off Old Bond Street.

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Shortly after James's death, and much to her family's astonishment, Victoria announced her intention of taking over her husband's share of the business. She very soon proved herself to be an extremely capable business woman. She made a specialty of English incunabula, and throughout the 20's and 30's she built up a thriving trade with countless museums and university libraries all over the world. When the vast Hertford Collection was sold off to pay death duties in 1938, Great-Aunt Victoria had her seat reserved in the front row of the auction gallery throughout the two weeks of the sale, and in the price register published afterwards the name Wilkins was prominent among the list of buyers.

In October, 1940, a direct hit from an incendiary bomb destroyed the premises and much of the stock of Benham & Wilkins overnight. She was close to sixty at the time, living alone in Hampstead, and I remember receiving a letter from her in which she told me that she had decided to sell out. She did not sound particularly regretful about it. "No doubt it had to happen/" she wrote, "and I consider myself fortunate that it did not happen to me too." I discounted the unfamiliar note of fatalism in her words as being due to shock.

She lived on in her house in Well Walk, growing perceptibly frailer as the years advanced, but with her mind still alert. I used to make a point of calling in to see her whenever I was up in town and was invariably offered China tea and caraway-seed cake for which she had a lifelong passion. On one occasion, in the late 50's, she told me she had once been "propositioned" by H.G. Wells.

"I had no idea you knew him," I said. "When was that?"

"Oh, at about the time he and Shaw and the Webbs were squabbling over the future of the Society."

"The Fabian Society?"

"Yes, of course. 1907, I think it was."

"And what was the proposition?"

She laughed. "The usual one, I gathered. He said he wished me to help him with a book he was writing on

the emancipation of women." She paused and gazed out of the window. "He was a strangely attractive little man."

"But you didn't accept?"

"No. Perhaps I should have done. Of course I had met him before that—at the Huxleys'. Everyone was talking about him." She paused again and seemed for a while to lose herself in reverie, then she

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remarked, "Did you ever read a story of his called *The Chronic Argonauts*?"

"I can't recall it," I said. "What was it about?"

"About a man who invents a machine which will carry him through Time."

"Oh, you mean *The Time Machine* / Aunt."

"Indeed I don't. I'm quite sure that was the title. I'd never seen 'chronic' used in that way before. It was a serial he was writing for a magazine. He showed me a copy of the first installment. You see we both knew the man it was based on."

"I'm surprised it was based on anyone," I said.

"Oh, yes," she assured me. "A Doctor Robert Pensley. He lived in Heme Hill. Like all of us in those days he too was a great admirer of Professor Huxley."

I helped myself to another slice of seed cake. "And what did the doctor make of young Wells's portrait of him?" I asked.

"As far as I know he never read it."

"Oh? Why not?"

"He disappeared."

I blinked at her. "Just like that?"

She nodded. "It created quite a stir at the time. There were rumors that he had skipped off to America."

"And had he?"

"I don't think so. And neither did Wells." She chuckled—a strangely youthful sound from lips so old—and added: "I remember H.G.'s very first words to me when he learnt what had happened: 'By God, Vikki, don't you see? He's done it!'"

"And what did he mean by that?" I asked.

"Traveled in Time, of course," said Aunt Victoria in the matter-of-fact tone she might have employed in saying: "Caught the 10:15 to Portsmouth."

I am ashamed to say I laughed.

She gave me a darting, sidelong glance from her clear, grey eyes. "You think it quite impossible, of course."

"Oh, quite," I said, setting down my tea cup and wiping the cake crumbs from my fingers with my handkerchief.

"Wells didn't think so."

"Ah, yes," I said. "But then he wrote science-fiction, didn't he?"

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"Well, I presume he'd just appreciated that he had the material for an excellent story. After all, he wrote it, didn't he?"

"He wrote it *down*," she said.

"Well, there you are then. And no doubt Doctor Pensley's descendants are living happily in America to this day."

Aunt Victoria smiled faintly and let the subject drop.

I was in Melbourne, Australia, right on the other side of the globe, when I received a letter telling me that Aunt Victoria had died. The news did not come as any great surprise because I knew she had been in poor health ever since catching a severe dose of flu in the early spring, but the sense of loss I felt was real enough. Her death seemed to nudge me appreciably nearer to my own grave.

When I returned home to England, some six weeks later, it was to discover that my aunt's mortal remains were nourishing the rose bushes in Highgate cemetery and the house in Well Walk had already been sold. I also discovered a letter awaiting me. It was signed by her bank manager, who, it appeared, was the executor of her will, and it informed me that I had been left a legacy of a thousand pounds together with "a particular token of the regard in which the late Mrs. Wilkins held you."

I lost no time in traveling up to town from my house in Bristol and presenting myself at the bank manager's office. After the formal exchange of polite regrets for the sad nature of the occasion, I was handed a brown paper parcel, securely tied and sealed, with my own name written upon it in Aunt Victoria's quite remarkably firm hand. I signed the official receipt, was presented with an envelope containing a cheque for 1000 pounds, and stepped out into the street. I was not consumed by any overwhelming curiosity to discover exactly what "token of regard" the parcel contained. From the shape of it I guessed that it must be a book of some kind, and I had a shrewd suspicion that it would prove to be the photograph album which Aunt Victoria and I had often looked at together when I visited her in Well Walk.

There being nothing further to detain me in London, I took a taxi to Paddington and caught the first available train back to Bristol. Having decided to invest a modest portion of my windfall on a first-class ticket, I had the unfamiliar luxury of a whole compartment to myself, and seated there, relaxed and extremely pleased with myself

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and the world, I finally got round to untying the string which, I did not doubt, Aunt Victoria had fastened with her own capable hands.

I soon realized that I had been mistaken in my previous assumption. The book which emerged from beneath the layers of brown paper and newsprint in which it was wrapped had certainly been old long before the invention of photography. It measured roughly 12 inches by 9, was bound in dark brown leather, and had a heavily ridged spine of the kind which I believe is known in the antiquarian book trade as "knuckled." There was no tooling of any kind either on the covers or on the spine, in fact nothing at all on the outside of the book to indicate what its contents might be. For the life of me I could not conceive why Aunt Victoria should have left it to me.

As I turned back the front cover, I found, lying inside, a sealed envelope, inscribed with my Christian name and bearing at the bottom right-hand corner a date—June 4th, 1958.

I laid the book down on the seat beside me, slit open the envelope and extracted two sheets of the tinted notepaper which my aunt had always favoured. I put on my spectacles and read the following:

Wednesday evening My dear Francis,

There was a point during our conversation this afternoon when I was sorely tempted to march upstairs and fetch down this boob. Though I am sure you don't realize it, there was something about the way in which you dismissed the very idea of time travel as being 'Quite impossible!' that struck me as almost unbearably smug. However, second thoughts being, as usual, better than first impulses, I have decided instead that I shall leave you the book in my will. So by the time you read this letter I daresay you will already have be-come accustomed to thinking of me as your late Aunt rather than your Great Aunt! I confess that it makes me smile even as I write it

From the ex-libris plate inside the front cover you will see that this book comes from the Hertford Library which was sold up in 1938. It was part of a lot consisting of some half a dozen miscellaneous ijth Century Registers which I obtained for the proverbial song simply because no one else seemed interested in them. It was not until I was going

through them to make out entries for our Overseas catalogue that I noticed that one of them had stitched into the back of it about twenty flimsy sheets of paper which were quite different

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in texture from those which make up the rest of the volume. Since the binding itself was indisputably ijth Century workmanship and all the other entries concerned the years 1662-1665, I started to examine these odd pages with some interest I discovered, to my astonishment, that they constituted a sort of rough journal or diary, written in pencil, and covering a period of some three weeks in August and September, 1665.

I will not spoil my own pleasure in imagining your expression as you read them by telling you what I believe them to be. All I will say is that the Register was entered in the Hertford Catalogue in 1808 as having been purchased along with two other 'from the Estate of Jonas Smiley Esq! To the very best of my knowledge they lay there in the library of Hertford Castle gathering dust for the next 130 years.

I trust you will find it as interesting and as instructive as I did.

Yours most affectionately, Victoria.

I re-read the letter from beginning to end in total bewilderment. At first, I confess, I could only assume that I was the victim of some extraordinary practical joke she had chosen to play upon me, but it was so *unlike* Aunt Victoria to do anything of the kind that, in the end, I simply shrugged and picked up the book. Sure enough, pasted inside the front cover was an engraved bookplate depicting two remarkably well-developed mermaids holding aloft a shell in w:¹ reclined a grinning skull, a quill pen and an hourglass. Circumscribing this somewhat ill-assorted gathering was a fluttering banner emblazoned with the legend *EX LIBRIS HERTFORDENSIS*. So at least there seemed to be no doubt about that part of Aunt Victoria's story. I turned over the stained flyleaf and found myself contemplating an ornate sepia scrip which informed me that this was ye Register opened on November 20th 1662 for ye Hostel of Saint Barnabas in ye Parish of Wapping of which ye Recording Clerk was one Tobias Gurney. The first entry on the next page read: *Deed, at the 4th hr. Agnes Miller, fern, age indet. of ye fev. quot. tert.*

I ran my eye down the column which appeared to consist almost entirely of records of deaths and then flicked on through the yellowed pages till I reached those leaves which Aunt Victoria had Spoken about. I saw at once why they had caught her attention. For

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one thing they measured little more than 6 inches by 4, and the paper, besides being badly faded at the edges of the sheets, was ruled with faint lines. But even more striking was the difference in the handwriting. These pages were covered in a minute, cramped, cursive script quite unlike the hand of the recording clerk. If I had to select one adjective to describe it, the word would be "scholarly." In fact the tiny writing put me immediately in mind of that of J.E. Lawless, my erstwhile tutor at St. Catherine's; there were even some of the identical abbreviations—"tho." for "though"; "wd." for "would"; "shd." for "should"—which I remembered he had favored. Settling myself firmly into the corner closest to the window, I raised the book to catch the maximum amount of daylight and began to read.

Some twenty minutes before the train was due at Bristol I had reached the last entry. I find it quite impossible to describe accurately my precise state of mind at that moment. I remember becoming conscious of an acute headache, the onset of which I had, presumably, ignored while I was engrossed in my reading. I remember too that as I unhooked my spectacles and gazed out of the window I experienced a most extraordinary sense of disorientation—perhaps "displacement" would be the better word—as though the green fields and cosy Wiltshire farms beyond the tract had become mysterious, insubstantial, illusory things; mere tokens of stasis in some fantastic temporal flux. The moment passed quickly enough—the discipline of a lifetime's ingrained habit of thought soon reasserted itself—but I was left with the same excessively unpleasant sense of inner quivering that I had once endured after experiencing a minor earthquake in Thessaloniki. To say that I doubted what I most firmly believed would be putting it too strongly; to say that my philosophical foundations had been temporarily shaken would not be putting it quite strongly enough.

It will, I am sure, be maintained that I am either the instigator of—or the victim of!—some elaborate hoax. The first contention I shall perforce ignore, since, knowing it to be untrue, it does not particularly concern me. To the second I am forced to return a reluctant verdict of "Not Proven." I have had the Register examined by two separate experts in such matters and both have assured me, to my own total satisfaction, that the notebook pages which have been incorporated within it were stitched into the binding at the time when the book itself was bound up, i.e., not later than

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18th Century and, in all likelihood, a good half-century earlier. *Yet the paper of the notebook itself is, indisputably, of a type not manufactured before 1860!* Ergo, either somebody is lying or the notebook is genuine.

If we assume that some person (unknown) had wished to perpetrate such a hoax, when could it have been done? From the internal evidence certainly not before 1804. Therefore this anonymous hoaxer must have had access to the Hertford Library, have inserted his spurious material into the Register, have replaced it on the library shelf and then *done nothing at all to draw attention to it* Since, presumably, the whole point of a hoax is to deceive as many people as possible, this strikes me as just about the most pointless hoax ever devised.

That leaves, as far as I am concerned, only my Great-Aunt Victoria. She had custody of the Register from the time of the sale in 1938 until the day of her death—ample opportunity certainly in which to have "doctored it** to her heart's content. Furthermore she, with her professional connections, would have been ideally situated to carry out such a plan had she wished to do so. This would have entailed forging the whole "diary" itself on suitable paper, having the Register broken down and the forged diary incorporated, reassembling the whole and restoring it to its original condition in such a way as to totally deceive two vastly experienced and disinterested professional experts. She would also have had to insert (or have caused to be inserted) two completely spurious entries into the Register proper, doing it in such a way that there was no observable discrepancy between those false entries and the ones which preceded and followed them. The only way in which this could have been done would have been by removing two of the original sheets, obtaining two blank sheets of the identical 17th Century rag paper, forging the entries to correspond *exactly* with those in the rest of the book, and then reassembling the whole. I am prepared to admit that all this *could* have been done, but nothing will ever succeed in convincing me that it was. Nevertheless, since such a thing is conceivably possible, I must to that extent accede to the verdict of "Not Proven" on the second of my two counts.

Having said that, all that remains is for me to transcribe *in toto*

the contents of this extraordinary document and to add, by way of

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an appendix, the relevant entries from the Register itself together with a few concluding observations of my own.

Although the transcript is a faithful word-for-word copy of the original text, I have taken the liberty of expanding the author's abbreviations, inserting the paragraphs, and tidying up the punctuation where I think it is called for. The diary commences at the top of the first page, and it is possible that a preceding page or pages were incorporated in the Register.

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It is, of course, utterly pointless to go on cursing myself for my idiotic complacency, yet has there been a single waking hour in the last 48 when I have not done so? To assume, as I did, that the Morlocks* had done no more than carry out an investigation of the superficial structure of my Machine was an inexcusable indulgence in wishful thinking, bolstered, unfortunately, by my successful onward voyage and return. Yet even now I am by no means certain that the Morlocks were responsible for that microscopic fracture of the dexter polyhedron. Could it not equally well have occurred during that final frenzied battle within the pedestal of the White Sphinx? Indeed it seems more than likely. What is utterly unforgivable is that I should have failed to detect the flaw when I carried out my detailed check on Friday. Well, few men can ever have paid more dearly for wanton carelessness.

I knew that something was amiss the moment I had recovered sufficiently from my initial vertigo to scan the dials. Instead of circling smoothly around the horologe the indicator arm had developed a perceptible and disquieting lurch, first slowing and then accelerating. I realized at once that two of the quartz pillars in the quincunx were out of phase and I suspected some minor fault of alignment which it would be but the work of a moment in the laboratory to correct.

Although the dials on the fascia showed that I was already well back into the 17th Century, a glance at my pocket watch informed me that my journey was less than two minutes old. Very gingerly I coaxed the right-hand lever towards me and was much alarmed to observe that the pulsation of the needle at once became

* *For this and similar references see The Time Machine by H.G. Wells.—Ed,*

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far more pronounced. This, together with that indescribable nausea which is seemingly an unavoidable concomitant of Time travel, produced in me a sensation that was uncomfortably close to panic. Nevertheless, I kept my head sufficiently to observe that I was not about to enter into conjunction with some massive external object and, very gently, I brought the lever back into the neutral position.

The machine was resting on the bare hillside, its brass runners buried in grass and buttercups. Above me the sun was blazing down out of a cloudless sky, and from its position relative to the meridian I judged the hour to be early afternoon. Some way down the slope of the hill below me two brown and white cows were grazing placidly, flicking their tails at the flies. As I glanced away I saw one of them raise its head and regard me with mild curiosity. So much for the 17th Century, I thought, and with a silent prayer on my lips I thrust forward the left-hand lever which would send me winging forward through the centuries to 1894. *And nothing happened!* I tried again and even risked further pressure on the right-hand lever. The result was exactly the same.

My emotions at that moment were all but identical with those I had experienced when I first looked down from the gazebo on the hillcrest above the Hall of Eloi and found my Machine was no longer standing where I had left it on the lawn before the White Sphinx. It is the fear that grips the marooned mariner when he sees the topsail finally dip below the horizon. For a minute or two I surrendered to it cravenly and then, thank Heaven! reason reasserted itself once more. I had successfully surmounted the earlier crisis: I should survive this too.

I climbed out of the saddle, stepped down into the grass, undipped the aluminum cover and peered into the womb of the quincunx. One glance was sufficient to tell me what had happened. Of the four polyhedral quartz prisms, the second dexter one had *fractured clean in two along its plane of cleavage!*

For a long moment I simply stared at it in disbelief while the full implication of the disaster gradually dawned upon me. With it came an overwhelming awareness of the grotesque and inescapable irony of my predicament. There, a mere ten paces from where I was standing, lay my workbench, and lying upon that workbench were no fewer than *four identical quartz polyhedra*, any one of which could have been fastened into place within a matter of moments! Ten

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paces or two hundred and thirty years! Compared with my previous voyage it was hardly a hair-breadth of Time, and yet, for all that, those vital components might just as well have been engulfed in the swamps of the Jurassic.

I reached into the quincunx, unscrewed the two halves of the broken rod, withdrew them and examined them. I thought I could detect a minute scratch ending just where the fracture began. 'Ah, fool/ I castigated myself bitterly. 'Crass, unmitigated foolf

I sat down in the grass with my back resting against the framework of the Machine, and tried to marshal my fragmented thoughts. It was plain enough that my only hope of escape was to obtain a replacement for that broken prism. I even derived a mite of consolation from the wry reflection that had it been the neodymium dodecahedron which had shattered I should have been lost indeed since that—chronically speaking—essential element had been discovered only in 1885! But how to set about obtaining a replacement?

I rose to my feet and consulted the fascia dials once more. A brief calculation told me that I was now in the year 1665 AJX The date did indeed touch some faintly disturbing chord in my memory, but I was too concerned with finding a solution to my immediate problem to spare any time on tracking it to its source. Reaching into the pannier below the saddle, I next drew out the canvas knapsack and my kodak. Then, mindful of my experiences with the Morlocks, I unscrewed the two control levers, thus still further

immobilizing my already impotent Machine. That done, I carefully removed the second of the dexter prisms, reasoning that, if a replacement were ever to be obtained, a complete artifact would provide a more satisfactory pattern than a broken one. These practical actions, small enough in themselves, did much to help me take that first imaginative step on the far side of the gulf, which is imperative if a traveler in Time is to preserve the full effectiveness of his intellectual faculties.

My next move was to take stock of my useful possessions. I was, it is true, somewhat better equipped than when I had first launched myself so impulsively into the Future, but since I had planned for a brief expedition into the early Holocene, it was open to question whether a patent pocket compass, a kodak, a specimen case, or a notebook and pencils would be of very much service to me in my present predicament. Far more to the point was the handful of loose change, which, by a fortunate oversight, I was still carrying in one of

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the thigh pockets of my knickerbockers. It amounted in all to two sovereigns, three florins, a sixpence and some assorted coppers. Apart from my fob watch, the other pockets surrendered little more than a small tin of licorice cashews, my tobacco pouch and pipe, a box of lubifers, a twin-bladed penknife and a brass-sheathed pocket lens. This latter I put to immediate use by verifying what I had already suspected concerning the microscopic cause of the fracture in the prism.

The warmth of the summer sun was striking full upon me. So I loosened the belt of my Norfolk jacket, hoisted the knapsack over my shoulder and, after bidding my Machine a truly heartfelt *au revoir*, settled my cap square on my head and set off, striding out through the buttercups across the flank of the hill in the direction of the Camberwell.

The plan of action I had settled upon was simple enough—to get to London as soon as I possibly could. It was there, if anywhere, that I might hope to find a skilled lapidary artificer whom I could prevail upon to fashion me a 4-inch polyhedral rod of rock crystal sufficiently accurate for my needs. An exact replica was obviously too much to hope for, but I reasoned that I had already sufficiently demonstrated how even a flawed rod would serve its purpose long enough to enable me to effect my return to the 19th Century.

Ten minutes brisk walking brought me within sight of the Thames basin, though the river itself I could perceive only as a tremulous silver flickering in the distance towards Rotherhithe some four miles to the northeast. I was astonished by the amount of woodland which clothed the south bank of the river from Battersea to Greenwich. Although it was largely dispersed in the form of small coppices and outgrown hedgerows, the spaces between those closest to me were filled by others yet more distant so that the general effect was to screen the city from my sight. Had I chosen to ascend to the crest of Heme Hill, I would doubtless have obtained a view of the whole panorama, but time was too precious. Leaving the hilltop windmill on my left, I descended by means of a dry and rutted cart track towards the untidy huddle of houses which I guessed must be ancient Camberwell.

The track led me down into the road, which I recognized as connecting Camberwell with Dulwich, and so I turned to my left and headed in the general direction of Walworth. As I rounded the

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corner which brought me in full view of the hamlet, I was surprised to observe that a rough stockade had been erected across the road. The centerpiece of this makeshift barrier was formed by a large hay wain, on the top of which were seated three men, one of whom appeared to be shouldering a musket. I paused for a moment to take stock of the situation; then, able to make nothing of it, I approached and called out to ask whether I was on the London road. "Aye!" shouted one of the men, rising to his feet "And keep a-going, stranger! We're all sound bodies here and by the Lord's grace will stay so."

Perplexed in the extreme, I continued moving steadily towards them, whereupon the same man shouted again, "Not one step further upon thy life!"

I halted in my tracks and stared at him—or rather at the musket which he was now pointing directly at my head!—and raised my hands to show that I carried no weapon. "I wish you no harm, good people," I cried.

"Nor we you, mister," responded the spokesman. "So get ye gone."

"But this is most uncivil," I protested. "I have urgent business to transact in London."

"Aye, and the Angel of Death likewise!" cried one of the others. "Four thousand souls been culled at last week's billing."

This extraordinary remark did what nothing else in the exchange had so far achieved. The significance of the final figure registered upon the dials of my Machine reverberated through my stunned mind like an electric alarm bell. *1665. The year of the Great Plague!*

My hands dropped to my sides as though paralyzed and I stood transfixed, wonderstruck, staring at the three men. One of them raised his fingers to his lips and whistled shrilly. A moment later I caught the excited yelping of dogs. There was an urgent cry of "Sic him! Sic him!" whereat I spun about and fled precipitately with a pack of eager curs snapping at my flying heels.

No sooner had I regained the sanctuary of the cart track than the dogs, with a few backward looks and admonitory snarls trotted off towards the village, leaving me with a painfully racing heart and the realization that my predicament was far worse than even I could have imagined. My historical knowledge of the effects of the Plague was woefully sketchy, though I did recollect from a childhood reading of

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Pepy's Diary that commercial life of some sort had continued in the city throughout the visitation. My longing to be quit forever of this benighted age increased a hundredfold. I resolved to strike out at once across the fields in the general direction of Southwark, avoiding, as far as humanly possible, the vicinity of any of the scattered farms or hamlets I might encounter on the way.

An hour (and several wearisome detours) brought me within sight of the Old Kent Road, along which I perceived a number of covered carts and several head of cattle being driven in the direction of London Bridge. I skirted round the edge of a cornfield, thrust my way through the hedge and, having gained the highway, set off at my best pace in the wake of this motley caravan. I soon came up with a young cattle drover, who eyed me somewhat oddly, no doubt on account of my dress, though in truth my tweed knickerbockers were perfectly recognizable descendants of his own leather breeches and woolen hose. The most obvious anachronism was my checkered cloth cap (all the men I had seen so far had been wearing either the broad-rimmed "wideawake" or the high-crowned "steeple" style of headgear favored by the Puritans). So on the pretense of wiping the sweat from my brow I removed the questionable article, stowed *it* away in my pocket, and gave the youth a good day. He returned my greeting civilly enough and enquired what I was traveling in. My look of perplexity led him to say, "Are ye not a pedlar?"

It seemed prudent to agree that I was, and I asked him whether he knew of any jewelers or instrument makers still trading in the city.

He shook his head and said he supposed they must all have fled if they had the means to do so. Realizing I should get no useful information from him and anxious to push on with all possible speed, I wished him a good journey and strode off in the wake of the carts.

I was by now within plain sight of Southwark Cathedral and the Old Bridge, and for the first time since setting foot in this grim century I found myself gazing about me with real curiosity. The great river—sparkling, green, and clear in a manner all but unimaginable in 1894—was crowded with vessels of every conceivable shape and size from tiny skiffs to quite substantial merchantmen. Indeed, further down stream below the Tower I counted no fewer than 23 large craft moored out in midchannel, while a host of small rowing boats fussed around them like water beetles. As to the city itself I think what struck me most forcibly was, firstly, the grisly row of several

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heads adorning the battlements of the Bridge Gatehouse and, secondly, the gaiety and brightness of the waterfront houses, each decorated individually to its owner's whim. The sight of those bright reflections shimmering on the sunny water affected me so strongly that it was with a real sense of impotence and loss that I suddenly realized how, within a mere twelvemonth, the ravages of the Great Fire would have destroyed forever most of what I was now seeing. That it must be so I acknowledged, but it caused me none the less of a pang for that.

As I approached the Gatehouse, I observed a group of watchmen armed with pikes and muskets examining the contents of the incoming carts and questioning the drivers. Since pedestrians did not appear to be attracting the same attention, I strode on purposefully, only to be halted by one of the guards demanding to know my business. I told him I was a pedlar-mechanician seeking out instrument makers in the city and added that I would be obliged if he could assist me with directions.

He looked me up and down, scrutinizing my woolen necktie and my stout Highland brogues with obvious suspicion. "And whence come ye, master pedlar?" he asked.

"Canterbury/" I replied glibly, offering the first likely name that came to mind.

"Be ye of sound health?"

"Indeed I am," I said, "and hopeful to remain so."

"Aye," he muttered, "with God's blessing, so are we all. Be advised by me, master, and look to peddle your wares elsewhere."

"I have no choice in the matter," I replied. "My trade is too rare." So saying, I slid my hand into my trousers pocket and jingled my coins meaningfully. "Would you happen to know of any jewelers still trading in the city?"

He squeezed his nose thoughtfully between his finger and thumb. "Ludgate's their common quarter. But the sickness lies heavy thereabouts they say. More I know not."

I thanked him for his help, drew out a penny from my pocket and handed it to him. As I hurried on to the bridge, I glanced and saw him turn the coin doubtfully between his fingers before tapping it against the steel blade of his pike.

I crossed the river without further incident, picked out the gothic spire of Old St. Paul's soaring high above the roofs to my left and

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knew that Ludgate lay immediately beyond it, hidden from my view. I passed through the gate at the north end of the bridge and stepped down into the city.

No sooner had I done so than the waterside breeze died away and I was assailed by a most terrible stench from the heaps of garbage and human ordure which lay scattered all down the center of the street, baking in the sun and so thick with flies that the concerted buzzing sounded like a swarm of angry bees. I felt my stomach heave involuntarily and clutched my handkerchief to my nose and mouth, marveling how the other pedestrians seemed able to proceed about their business seemingly oblivious to the poisonous stench.

I had covered barely 200 yards before I came upon a house, securely shuttered and barred, with a clumsy cross daubed upon its door in red paint and the ominous words *Lord, have mercy upon us* scrawled above it. Dozing on a stool beside it was an old man with a scarlet wooden staff resting across his knees. I observed that my fellow pedestrians were careful to give the area a wide berth, and at the risk of fouling my shoes I too edged out towards the center of the street glancing up as I did so in time to see a small white face peeping fearfully down at me from behind one of the high leaded windows. In spite of the heat I shivered and quickened my pace, taking the first available turn to the left and hurrying down what is still, I believe, called Thames Street. As soon as I saw the cathedral spire rising to my right, I turned again and headed towards it

As I made my way along the narrow alley, I scanned the signboards on either side and eventually saw one which bore a representation of a pair of compasses. I hurried towards it only to discover that the shop was locked and barred. I squinted in through the leaded window at the selection of terrestrial globes, astrolabes, hourglasses and astronomical rings and felt my heart sink. What earthly hope had I of finding anyone capable of supplying my needs in an age which was only just beginning to emerge from the shadows of the mediaeval? As I turned dispiritedly away, I saw an elderly gentleman emerging from a door further up the street. I waited until he came abreast of me and then accosted him politely and asked whether he knew of any instrument maker or optician still working in the neighborhood.

Perhaps something in my manner of speech or my dress intrigued him because he peered at me shrewdly from beneath the broad brim

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of his hat and asked me if I would care to specify exactly what it was I was looking for.

Having nothing to gain by not doing so, I told him I had urgent need of some skilled artificer capable of fashioning for me a small rod or cylinder of rock crystal.

"Why, sir," he said, "if you seek a lens grinder, then Master William Tavener is your man. His shop lies hard by St. Anne's in Carter Lane." He indicated with his cane the direction I should take, adding that he could not vouch for it that the man had not fled the City, though he believed not

I thanked him warmly for his assistance and made haste to follow his directions. Ten minutes later I had found the shop, exactly where he had described it, with a large gilded spectacles frame hanging above it for its sign. I glanced briefly at the small display of reading lenses in the window, realized that this or nothing was what I had been seeking, and with a painfully racing heart reached for the door latch. To my inexpressible relief the door opened and I stepped over the threshold into the shop.

A small brass bell was standing on the wooden counter, and, after waiting for a minute or so, I picked it up and rang it briskly. I heard a door bang somewhere in the back regions of the shop and the sound of approaching footsteps. Finally a young woman appeared holding a baby in her arms. She stood gazing at me somberly for a moment then asked, "What is it ye seek, master?"

"Is Mr. Tavener in?" I asked. "I have some urgent business for him."

A distant voice called out: "Who is it, Bessie?"

"Robert Pensley," I supplied. "*Doctor* Robert Pensley."

I thought I detected a faint quickening of interest in her face as she passed on this information. "Hell be down to you in a minute, sir," she said.

"Does he work alone, then?"

"Th* prentices have flown this month past," she said. "I warrant Fd have followed them had it not been for father. Plague or no plague, hell not budge."

"Have you any rats in your house?" I enquired.

"Aye, some I daresay. What house hereabouts hasn't? They swarm up from the fleet like black heathens."

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"Their fleas are the plague carriers/" I said. "Rid yourself of the rats and you'll be safe."

She laughed. "Lord, sir, the beasts are dying without any help from us! I found two lying stiff in the jakes this very morning."

"You didn't touch them?"

"Not I," she said. "Father hoisted them with the furnace tongs and flung 'em over the wall into the ditch."

"On no account handle them whatever you do," I said. "One bite from an infected flea and that could well be the death of you. Believe me, I know."

"They do say as it's the foul air," she said. "There's orders posted abroad for the watch to burn night fires at every street crossing— and all day long in the open yards. But father says the London air's always been as foul even when there was no plague."

"He's right," I insisted. "So do as I say, Bessie, and promise me you'll touch no dead rats; then you and your babe will both live through it safely."

She smiled. "Me, I hate the ugly brutes. Hark ye, here comes father now."

A middle-aged man with a bald crown to his head and sparse brown hair touched with grey came shuffling out of the passage at the back of the counter and nodded to me. "We've not met before, I think, sir," he said. "What is it ye seek?"

I lifted my knapsack on to the counter, unbuckled it and drew out the complete prism and the two broken pieces. "I want you to cut me an eight-faced crystal prism to these identical dimensions, Mr. Tavener," I said. "Can you do it?"

He took the whole crystal from me and held it up, twisting it this way and that as he squinted at it. "May I aske who fashioned this for ye, sir?"

"I had it cut in Italy."

" 'Tis fine workmanship. I've seen none better." And with that he handed it back to me with a smile.

"But you must keep it, Mr. Tavener," I insisted. "It is to be your pattern. The dimensions are vital, I do assure you."

"I'm sorry to disappoint ye, Doctor," he said, "but seemingly that's what I must do. Single-handed I'm so tardy in my work that it would be the best part of a three-month before I could even consider

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it. Why, I have grinding in hand upstairs for Master Hooke, due last month, that bids fair to keep me till the middle of next."

"Mr. Tavener," I cried desperately. "I have not traveled all this way to find you, only to be denied! Will you tell me how long it would take to cut such a prism?"

He lifted the rod again and turned it over speculatively between his fingers. "Cut *and* polish?" he enquired.

"Of course."

"Two or three days. Depending on how fine ye wanted it."

"And what would you charge?"

"A guinea a day for the skilled labour."

"Ill pay you ten," I said, and the words were no sooner out of my mouth than I realized what I had said.

He peered up at me quizzically over the crystal. "Ten guineas?" he repeated slowly. "Ye'd pay me *ten gold guinea pieces*?"

I nodded. "I will. Providing you'll put the work in hand for me at once."

He looked down again at the prism and traced its beveled contours with his fingertips. I could see he was wondering what kind of man I was to have brought him such a proposition. "D'ye mind telling me why the matter is so urgent, sir?"

"You'd not believe me if I did, Mr. Tavener," I said, "but I assure you it could well be a matter of life or death. Time is of the essence."

"Well, there again, sir," he said, "I know not whether I even have such a blank to suit. Like all else, good crystal's hard to come by in these black days. But perhaps you'd care to step up into the workshop and see what there is."

"Then you *will* undertake it?"

"If I have no satisfactory blank, sir, then no amount of willing on my part will make ye one," he said. "So you'd best come up and see for yourself."

I followed him through the shop, up some dark stairs and into a long, low-beamed workroom which must surely have been cantile-vered on to the back of the house. Windows ran round three sides, and two of them looked out over the graveyard of the church next door. The early evening sunlight was slanting in through a dusty drapery of cobwebs. An antique wooden treadle lathe stood against one wall. Suspended above it was a rack of tools. Instead of a fireplace

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there was a charcoal oven-furnace and a glass-making crucible. The whole place was depressingly reminiscent of a Diirer engraving of an alchemist's glory hole, but while Mr. Tavener was routing in the depths of a cupboard, I examined two lenses I found lying on a bench and discovered them to be of astonishingly high quality.

Tavener emerged clasping a chunk of quartz which he brought across to the bench and laid before me. "That's Tintagel pebble/" he said. "Would it do?"

I picked up the crystal and held it to the light. As far as I could tell, it was flawless. I handed it back to him and expelled my breath in a long sigh. "It will do perfectly, Mr. Tavener," I said.

At that very moment the clock in the church began to sound a chime, and without thinking I pulled my watch from my fob pocket, intending to set it by the prevailing time. I had just clicked open the gold face-guard when I noticed that Tavener's gaze was riveted on the instrument I smiled. "You will not have seen a watch like this, I daresay, Mr. Tavener?" I detached the chain clip and held the instrument out to him.

He took it from me and turned it round wonderingly in his fingers, rather as the guard at the bridge gatehouse had turned over the penny I had given him. Then he lifted it to his ear and a look of the most profound astonishment suffused his face. It is, in truth, a fine timepiece, made by Jacques Simenon of Paris and given to me to mark my 21st anniversary by my dear mother and father. I took it back from him, opened the case with my thumbnail and showed him the jewel precision movement within. "Why, sir," he breathed, "that is a true miracle! God's truth, never in my life did I dream to see such a thing."

"I warrant it is the only one of its kind in the world today," I said.

"That I can well believe, sir. I doubt the King himself hath such a treasure."

"Mr. Tavener," I said slowly, "would *you* like to own that watch?"

He looked at me as if I had gone clean out of my mind and said nothing at all

"I mean it," I said. "So anxious am I to have the prism cut that I am prepared to give you my watch in exchange for it. It is worth far more than ten guineas. Make for me a perfect copy of that prism, put it into my hand, and I will put the watch into yours. See, here is

my hand in pledge of it"

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Tavener looked down at the watch ticking away merrily on the bench with the yellow sunlight winking from the jeweled balance. It almost seemed to have hypnotized him. "Well?" I said. "Isn't it a fair bargain?"

"Aye, sir," he agreed at last "I must suppose ye best know what ye are about," and with that he joined his palm to mine and we shook upon the contract.

"And when can you start?" I asked him.

"Tomorrow, God willing. But I shall have to ride to Edmonton first for pumice powder and rottenstone. Fm clean out of both of them."

"How long will that take?"

"All day, most like. Tis ten mile there and no less back."

"And those things you must have?"

"Aye. For cutting pebble. Tis not like your whoreson glass. The other grits I have enough of."

"It's not for me to teach you your business, Mr. Tavener," I said. "All I can do now is to wish you God speed."

"Believe me, I'll not tarry, sir. As it is, the lass won't care to be left."

I picked up the watch and clipped it back onto its chain. "I am just newly arrived in London, Mr. Tavener," I said, "and as yet have no lodgings. Could you perhaps recommend me to some inn close by?"

He scratched his chin. "*The Three Keys* in Lower Wharf Street is a clean house," he said. "It's just down alongside

Paul's Steps. I daresay that would suit ye. The air is more wholesome by the water."

So I took my leave of him with my heart feeling a good deal lighter than it had for many hours. I soon found The Three Keys and prevailed upon the landlord to rent me an attic room overlooking the river, paying for one week's rent and board in advance with the first of my two sovereigns. I told him that the coin was a Polish t/zaZer—Henderson the numismatist once told me that this coin bore a superficial resemblance to our modern sovereign—and he accepted it cheerfully enough, no doubt on account of his having frequent dealings with sailors from foreign ports. I drank a mug of ale with him and ate an excellent mutton pasty while he regaled me with horrific stories of the ravages the "visitation" was wreaking upon the city. He also told me that the ships I had seen drawn up in midstream were filled with wealthy citizens who had embarked their

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wives and families and would permit no one else to set foot aboard, all their daily needs being supplied by boatmen who purchased food on shore, rowed out with it, and loaded it into baskets which were then hauled up on deck.

Soon after this I retired to my room intending to take a short nap, but whether from the unaccustomed effect of the strong ale or by simple reaction to the day's exertions, I fell deeply asleep and did not wake until the next morning, though I seem dimly to recall having my dreams invaded by the sound of a handbell being rung in the street below and the jarring clatter of iron-shod cart wheels upon cobble stones.

Apart from a brief excursion this morning along the waterfront, during which I purchased for myself a less anachronistic hat with one of my three florins and a plain-fronted, linen bib shirt with another, I have spent the whole day closeted in my attic writing up this record of what must surely be one of the most extraordinary days ever spent by a 19th Century gentleman.

August 28th. To Tavener's early, only to find the shop locked up. I waited for over half an hour hoping that at least his daughter would put in an appearance but saw nobody. I made my way round to the back of the premises and peered up at the workshop windows. The whole place seemed utterly deserted. The rest of the morning I spent wandering about the city in an agony of apprehension. Finally I returned to Carter Street, knocked on the door of the house adjoining the shop and inquired whether they knew anything of the man's whereabouts. The woman told me that Tavener, accompanied by his daughter and her child had set out early the previous morning in a small pony cart and had not been seen since. Telling myself they had been delayed at Edmonton and would surely return that afternoon, I wandered into the cathedral and, despite my own anxiety, was deeply moved by the sight of hundreds of people all kneeling in silent prayer. I read a printed proclamation which I found nailed up in the cathedral porch. It was signed by the Lord Mayor and the Sheriffs and gave a series of orders to the citizens, some of which explained the odd noises I had heard—handbells, horns blowing and the rest. Nothing more desperately ironical than the directions *to kill all dogs and cats!*—the one slender hope of keeping some of the rats out of

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the houses! Returned to Tavener's three times more, then finally back here feeling thoroughly depressed.

August 29th.

Spent a wretched night lying awake listening to the melancholy cries of the bellman—*Bring out your de-a-a-dl Bring out your de-a-a-dl* Resolved to try to speak to the Mayor or the Sheriffs and attempt to persuade them to at least rescind the order for the destruction of dogs and cats. Heard the squeaking of mice—or rats!—behind the wainscot and broke out into a cold sweat of pure terror. Would I not be better advised to seek lodgings south of the river?

(later)

Still no sign or word of Tavener. Wrote him a note which I thrust under his door, urging him to contact me immediately he returns. Found another lens grinder in Cheapside, but lacking the prisms which I had left with Tavener, I could only give him a rough description of what I wanted. Since he had no suitable crystal anyway, it was so much wasted effort.

However he told me that William Tavener was "a true man of his word" and that my business could not be in better hands. Consolation of a sort, I suppose, if only I could be sure that my business *was* in his hands!

A thoroughly unnerving encounter in a street (Bread St.?) linking Cheapside with Watling Street. Saw a man I took for a drunkard staggering towards me. Just before he reached me, he pitched over and fell full length on the cobbles. I hurried up to him—he was lying on his face—turned him over and saw to my horror that he had all the signs of the plague, gross swellings at the sides of his neck and dark blotches under his skin from internal bleeding. There was a trickle of blood running from the corner of his mouth, though this may well have been a result of his fall. He was still breathing—a throaty, rasping sound—and as I bent over him, he vomited up a black, evil-smelling bile—shuddered once, violently, and lay still. I looked up and saw that the narrow street, which had been busy enough when I entered it, was now completely deserted. All round me I heard the staccato sounds of doors and window shutters being clapped to. I felt for the poor devil's pulse and found nothing. I left him lying there in the street and hurried away.

When I had recovered something of my composure, I made my way straight to the Mansion House and asked if I could speak to one

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of the Sheriffs or some other person of authority upon a matter of great urgency. Finally I was granted an audience with a Mr. Robinson, the Private Secretary to Sir Charles Doe. He listened patiently while I poured out my reasons for at least rescinding the order for the destruction of cats and dogs. Having heard me out, he thanked me politely and then told me that I was mistaken since it had been proved quite conclusively that the plague was transmitted by the "evil miasma" which was inhaled by these very animals and then breathed out upon their unsuspecting victims! Besides, he added with a charming smile, did I really suppose that such a tiny creature as a *flea* could carry all the monstrous weight of such appalling infection? Furthermore, if extra proof were needed, could any man deny that fleas had been skipping around London for years before the outbreak of the present calamity? "Bubonic plague," I said, "is carried by the black rat in the form of an invisible bacterium, *bacillus pestis*. When the rats die of the infection, their fleas seek out other hosts and by sucking their blood transmit the infection to them. Would you be so good as to record that fact and see that it is conveyed to Sir John Lawrence? If the authorities act promptly, thousands of innocent lives may yet be saved." Mr. Robinson smiled and nodded and scribbled something on a piece of paper. "I will see that your message is conveyed to His Lordship, Doctor Pensley," he said. "And now I really must beg ye to excuse me, for I have a great deal of most pressing business to attend to." And that was that.

August 30th. It is now three whole days since I spoke to Tavener and still nothing. Last night, for the first time, I found myself the victim of a most dreadful depression, which I could not shake off. All day long a heavy pall of cloud has hung over the city, and my eyes are still red and inflamed from the sulfurous smoke of those infernal bonfires they light to *sweeten the air!* This afternoon I was assailed by an ungovernable panic fear that my Machine had been discovered and removed. I ran down to the waterside, paid a boatman sixpence to ferry me over to Southwark and made my way back across the fields to Heme Hill. My relief at discovering my Machine still standing exactly where I had left it—and, apparently, untouched—quite overwhelmed me. I sank down in the grass beside it and wept like a child. While I was making my return, a violent thunderstorm broke,

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and by the time I eventually got back to the inn I was soaked to the skin. The landlord persuaded me to drink a stiff tot of hot Hollands punch, which, though it may not be the universal specific he claims, certainly seems to have done something to lift my leaden spirits.

August 31st.

Tavener is returned!! The serving maid who attends on me in my room brought up my clothes, which had been drying overnight in the kitchen, and told me that Tavener's daughter had brought word to the innkeeper. My spirits soared like a sky lark. I was out of bed, had dressed, and was on my way to Carter Street within minutes of hearing the news. Bessie came to the shop door herself and told me that her father was already at work upstairs on my commission. Not wishing to delay him still further, I asked her to tell me what had happened. Whereupon she invited me through into their parlor and told me how they had been stopped at Stanford by a barrier across the road, similar in all respects to that which I had encountered at Camberwell. Unable to persuade the villagers to let them through, they had been forced to make a detour as far westward as Palmer's Green before they could circle back by a maze of by-lanes towards Edmonton. They had spent that night under a haystack and, on resuming their journey next morning, had reached Edmonton around noon only to find to their dismay that there a similar barricade had been erected. Her father had spent most of the afternoon parleying with the constables and had eventually prevailed upon them to allow him through. But their troubles were still not over. The dealer who normally supplied him with materials had shut up his

works for the duration of "the visitation" and gone to lodge with his sister in Newmarket! Having got so far, the resourceful Tavener was not to be denied. He forced an entry into the store shed, helped himself to whatever he wanted, left some money to pay for it together with a note of explanation and, next morning, the three of them were on their way back to London.

All had gone well until, while they were descending Stanford Hill, the axle of their hired pony-cart broke. Tavener was somehow able to effect a temporary repair which enabled them to crawl back to Wood Green where they had spent the rest of that day finding a wheelwright and persuading him to replace the broken axle. This meant still further delay, and by the time the job was finished it was

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too late to continue to London. They spent that night in Wood Green and had set out the following day, arriving back at Carter Lane at about the same time as I was on my way back from Heme Hill.

I have recounted here briefly what Bessie Tavener spent an animated hour in describing, painting a remarkably vivid word picture of the pathetic bands of fugitives from the city whom they had encountered roaming the forest round Woodford—"living like gypsies, poor souls, with nary a scanthing of provender to keep their bones from rattling!" I was moved to ask her whether she regretted having to return to London, but she said there were already many cases of plague in the outlying districts and if she was fated to die of it she would rather draw her last breath in her own house than lost among strangers. I repeated my stern warning about the rats and extracted a solemn promise from her that she would keep well clear of any place where fleas might be caught. She gave me her word readily enough, but I suspect it was more to humor me than because she believed me.

I looked in briefly upon Tavener before I left and told him how inexpressibly relieved I was to see him back. He merely nodded, gave me a shy grin, and returned to his lathe. As I stepped out into the street, which smelt mercifully sweeter for the deluge yesterday evening, I felt as though a huge and suffocating burden had been lifted from my shoulders.

Sept. 1st The soaking I received in the thunderstorm seems to have left me with a chill. Hardly surprising. However, I have before me one of the landlord's excellent "Hollands tonics," which is a great source of comfort. Shortly before noon I called round at Tavener's to see how the work was progressing only to find him engaged in packing up a box of lenses for a little hunch-backed fellow in a grubby wig. Tavener introduced him to me as Master Hooke. As I shook him by the hand, I thought, by way of a joke, to say: "*ut tensio sic vis*, Mr. Hooke." He gave me a most extraordinary look as if to say: "Who is this madman I have by the hand?" and the thought crossed my mind that perhaps he had not yet formulated that shortest of all Physical **Laws which posterity would link to his name. Thereafter we** chatted

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in a desultory way about the plague until he hobbled off with his box of lenses under his arm.

After he had gone, Tavener showed me how the work on the prism was progressing. The blank is already two-thirds shaped in rough, and he hopes to have that part of the work completed by this evening. Then the labor of polishing begins. In spite of my pressing him he would not give me a definite date for completion on the grounds that Tintagel pebble was notoriously slow to take a fine polish, being "hard nigh unto diamond." He is certainly a most meticulous craftsman, who obviously takes a profound—though somewhat inarticulate—pride in the quality of his work,

Sept. 2nd. A violent bout of sweating in the night left me with a feeling of great lassitude and a severe headache. I arose late, dressed myself, went out into the street and was overcome with a fit of giddiness not unlike the vertigo I have experienced while Time traveling. I have no doubt at all that it is an unwelcome after effect of the chill, but I could well do without it. On my returning to the inn the landlord made my blood run cold with a story of some poor pregnant girl in Cripplegate who was nailed up in her house when one of her sisters contracted the plague. All the rest of the family were stricken down one after the other until finally, when only she was left alive, she gave birth and, with no one on hand to help her, died, not of the plague, but of a hemorrhage! With her self-delivered infant in her arms! The sheer, wanton cruelty of this policy of sealing up houses is almost beyond belief. No phrase sickens me more than the pious: " 'Tis God's will," and I must be hearing it in one form or another twenty times a day.

Sept. 3rd. Little doubt in my mind but that I've caught a really nasty dose of influenza. I have passed all the day lying in bed, and despite the sun beating down on the tiles overhead making this attic as hot as an oven, I have spent much of the time shivering violently. When the servant girl came up to make my bed, I told her I had caught a bad chill and asked her to be good enough to fetch me up a mug of strong spiced ale. That was over three hours ago and still she has not returned.

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Sept. 9th? Hostel of St. Barnabas. Days of nightmare. What is memory? What dream? Grey-Morlock figures bending over me, prodding at my chest, thrusting me into my clothes, carrying me downstairs with a rag soaked in brandy stL into my mouth. A boat. Stars swirling round in the sky above me. Squeaking of oars. Voices whispering. Waking again to find the sun hammering nails into my naked eyes. My knapsack is lying on the sand beside me. Where am I? My fumbling fingers explore my body as though it is a stranger's. My joints are all on fire, and my head feels as though a red-hot gimlet is being screwed into my brain. Beneath my armpit the outline of an unfamiliar lump. Another in my groin. *Buboes!* Pain gives way to sheer, mindless terror. I am falling backwards down the black well-shaft that has no bottom. Voices. Hands lifting me. Hands carrying me. Falling, falling without end. I open my eyes to see a stone vaulted roof arching above me. As I stare up at it, a cowed face swims into my field of vision. Its lips move. "Welcome, stranger." "Where am I?" (Is that really my own voice?) "The hostel of Saint Barnabas." "I have the plague?" The cowl nods. "Am I dying?" "We think not." Time passes. I sleep; I dream; I wake. Sleep; dream; wake. Strong, firm, gentle hands raise me and prop me back against straw-filled sacks. Soup is spooned into my mouth and a worried voice urges: "Drink, Robert." I swallow and choke. "Again." I swallow. "Again. Good i'faith. Most excellently done." "Who brought me here?" "Who knows, Robert? Friends to be sure. They could have drowned ye in the river like a puppy, for all ye could have stayed them." A pause, then: "Who is Weena?" "Weena?" "Aye. Ye called on her by the hour in your raving. Dost wish me to send word to her that ye lie here?" "She's dead." He rises from my bedside and sketches a token blessing over me. "My knapsack," I croak. "Fear not, Robert. Tis here." He lifts it onto my bed and then moves off down the ward. I fumble the buckle undone, extract my notebook and force myself to write a note to Tavener. Then I sleep again. When I wake next, I make this entry. It has taken me nearly three hours to complete it.

Sept. nth.

Today Brother James trimmed my beard for me and has promised

to see that my note is delivered to Tavener. He assures me too that

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"through God's infinite mercy" I have successfully weathered the worst of the storm. Twenty-four patients have died since I was brought in. The bell in the chapel never seems to stop its mournful tolling.

Sept. 12 th. The superstitious fear of infection is presumably what I have to thank for the fact that I still have all my possessions down to the last pencil—that and the fact that the innkeeper's livelihood was at stake. Had word got out that I had the plague, The Three Keys would now be a "sealed house."

Sept. 13th. This afternoon I spent half an hour trying to persuade Brother Dominic, the physician, that the infection is transmitted primarily by rats and their fleas. I had hardly more success than I had with Secretary Robinson even though I thought to cite Harvey to illustrate how the bacillus was carried through the bloodstream. B.D. told me he thought it was an interesting theory but that proof was lacking. I told him that if he swabbed out his wards with a 250/1 solution of sulfuric acid, he'd soon have all the proof he needed. "And what is sulfuric acid, Robert?" On my telling him it was another name for oil of vitriol he nodded, but I suspect he was really no more convinced than Robinson had been.

Sept. 14th. A message was brought in to me by a walking patient that a Master William Tavener was without and would speak with me but was fearful of entry. He sent word to say that the work was finished and that he had it now upon him. On hearing this I crawled off my bed, staggered the length of the ward like a drunkard and so, by painful degrees, proceeded to the hostel gate. "Tavener?" I croaked. "Is that you, man?" He stood a little way off and stared in at me. "In God's name, Doctor Pensley, ye are sadly changed!" "I'm recovered now," I said, clutching at the iron rails of the gate for support. "It's quite safe to come close." "That I durst not, Doctor," he called. "Go ye back a way and I'll push them through to ye." I did as he said, though how I contrived to remain standing is a miracle. Whereupon he ran to the gate and quickly thrust a bundle wrapped

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in cloth through onto the flagstones. I picked it up, unwrapped it with shaking hands and found, lying inside, swaddled in lambswool, the two whole prisms together with the two broken pieces. *And for the life of me I could not tell the copy from the original!* My eyes filled with tears I was quite powerless to prevent. "God bless you, William Tavener!" I cried. "You are indeed a master among craftsmen!" and taking out my watch and chain, I held them up so that he could see them plainly, then laid them down upon the flagstones. He let the watch lie there while I stepped back; then he darted forward and scooped it into a leather bag he had ready for the purpose. "Farewell, Doctor," he called. "God be wi'yd" and he was gone. Somehow I managed to stagger back to the ward and there collapsed upon my cot.

Sept. 15. Feel too weak to write much. Obviously overdid things yesterday. The prism is a true marvel—a perfect replica. No doubt at all it will fulfill its function.

16. Vomiting all last night. Feel v. weak.

17-Diarrhea and vomiting.

disgust

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There it ends. The last entry is so faintly penciled that it is very difficult to decipher. The word could possibly be read as "despair." However, the Register itself leaves us in no doubt as to the final outcome. One of the two entries for September 20th, 1665, reads: *Deed. at ye \$th hr, one Rbt. Penly (sic) of med. yrs. of ye black flux.* It is matched by a previous entry for September 5th: *Admi. one Penly, sick nigh unto death.*

In the weeks which followed my initial perusal of the Hertford Manuscript I took certain steps to ascertain, for my own satisfaction,

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whether the journal was in fact nothing more than an elaborate and pointless forgery.

My first problem was to obtain a specimen of the true Doctor Pensley's handwriting. I wrote to Somerset House and inquired whether he had left a will, only to be informed that there was no one of that name in their probate records for the years 1894-1899. I then thought to try the civil records for Heme Hill and wrote to the Cam-berwell Town Clerk, but again drew a blank. I could find no Pensley in the London telephone directory, and a discreet advertisement placed in the personal column of *The Times* proved just as unrewarding. However, these initial disappointments served only to spur my determination. I contacted an old friend of mine in Cambridge and asked him to consult the university records on my behalf. Within a fortnight I learnt that Robert James Pensley had been admitted to Emmanuel College as an Exhibitioner in the year 1868.

I traveled down to Cambridge and there in the college records I found at last what I had been seeking. It was not very much certainly—a mere signature—but when I laid it beside an entry in the Hertford text where the author had written out his own name, I was convinced that the writing was by the same hand. My instinctive conviction has since been confirmed by the opinion of a professional graphologist.

My next move was to consult the back files of local newspapers. The only one which still survives is *The Dulwich and District Observer*, and there in the yellowed print of the issue for the week of June 18th, 1894, tucked away among advertisements for safety bicycles and patent knife powder, I found: *Puzzling Disappearance of Well-Known Amateur Scientist* The account, written in an excruciatingly "literary" style, described how Doctor Robert Pensley, the only surviving son of James and Martha Pensley, had vanished from his home in Heme Hill on the morning of June 7th and had not been seen or heard from since. There was a thinly veiled suggestion that the doctor had been suffering from severe mental strain brought on by overwork. His housekeeper, in an exclusive interview with "our Reporter," described how her employer was in the habit of vanishing into his laboratory "for hours on end, bless him, and all night too sometimes." There the article ended, and since I could find no further references to the mystery in any later issue, I can only suppose that the matter had been purposely hushed up.

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The Hertford Manuscript

But I could not let the matter rest there. Some strange, haunting quality in that penciled manuscript beckoned to me like a forlorn will-o'-the-wisp, and I resolved to track down as many of the historical references as it was possible to do after an interval of over three hundred years. During the past eighteen months, whenever I have had the opportunity, I have consulted ancient documents in the Guildhall, the Stationers' Hall, the British Museum, and the London Records Office in an attempt to verify what I already *felt* to be true, namely that in some wholly inexplicable manner Robert Pensley *had* succeeded in transferring himself backwards in time to the 17th Century and had there perished.

My first notable success was in establishing that one William Tavener, a member of the Guild of Spectacle Makers, had occupied premises next to the Church of St. Anne in Carter Lane. The date given was 1652. A further entry recorded that two apprentices had been bound to the aforesaid Master Tavener at premises in New Cheapside in 1668! So he, at least, seems to have escaped both the plague and the fire.

In a Victorian handbook entitled *The Inns of Elizabethan London* I came upon a reference to The Three Keys of Lower Wharf Street. Like most of the other establishments mentioned it was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666.

The Hostel of Saint Barnabas—a Franciscan Charity Foundation—is reasonably well documented. It functioned until the early 19th Century when it was pulled down to make way for a new dockyard.

Last May, in the archives of the Mansion House, I unearthed the name of one Samuel Robinson, Esq., recorded as having been appointed to the post of *amanuensis privatus* to Sir Charles Doe, Sheriff, in the year 1663.

In 1665, Robert Hooke was certainly in London, working as "curator of Experiments" for the newly founded Royal Society, and I have no reason to doubt that he would have called upon the services of Master Tavener to supply him with his optical apparatus. Incidentally, it might not be inappropriate to point out that Robert Hooke, as well as formulating his famous Law, has also been credited with a multitude of other discoveries, among them the invention of the spring balance wheel without which the science of horology (not to mention navigation) would doubtless have languished for many years longer in the Dark Ages!

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Yet, when all is said and done, such "facts" as I have been able to disinter seem to raise more questions than they answer. I feel I am forever condemned to pace the circumference of a circle which turns out to be not a circle at all but a spiral—my point of arrival is never the same as my point of departure. For to accept the Hertford Manuscript at its face value must surely mean accepting a concept in which Time is both predetermined and yet infinite, an endless snake with its tail in its own mouth, a cosmos in which the Past and the Future coexist and will continue to do so for all Eternity.

How then is it that I both *can* and *do* believe that Robert Pen-sley's journal, written in his own hand in the year 1665, was already lying there gathering dust on a shelf in the library of Hertford Castle for fifty years before its author had drawn his first infant breath in the year 1850? Or that he died, most horribly, on a straw pallet in a charity hospital in the district of Wapping, beside the silver Thames, clutching in his stiffening fingers a fragment of polished rock crystal which he had staked his life to obtain, only to lose the wager at the very moment when he must surely have believed that he had won?