

*Robert F. Young's new story is full of eerie and compelling images; it concerns a time traveler who voyages to the after-math of the Battle of Armageddon and makes a chilling discovery...*

## Revolution 20

BY  
ROBERT F. YOUNG

**A**fter stepping out of my time machine (the Time Traveler said), I dragged it into a nearby copse and camouflaged it with branches that I cut from the trees. I knew it would not be long before the leaves on the branches died and fell to the ground, revealing the machine's presence, but this posed no problem, for I did not plan to remain in the future for more than a day.

I had no idea what year I had emerged in, but I knew from the instructions with which I had programmed the machine that spatially, at least with respect to Earth, I had not moved an inch.

I did not believe, however, despite the fact that my house had disappeared from around me and despite the presence of a copse where none had existed before, that my leap through time exceeded half a century, until, emerging from the trees and looking down upon the plain that spread out below and far beyond the hill on which my house had stood, I saw that the vast expanse of cultivated fields that had greeted my eyes "that morning" when I looked out my bedroom window had become a necropolis.

The graves spread out both to right and left as far as my gaze would go, and extended into the distance before me till at last a city, which stood where no city had stood before, barred their way. Most of them were marked by horizontal grave-stones set flush with the ground, but there were occasional old-fashioned tombstones, too. As for the city, it bore a strong resemblance to most cities when viewed from afar, except that it was surrounded by a wall. Its presence lent a reassuring note to the macabre scene, and, deciding to pay it a visit, I descended the hill.

I took nothing with me, other than the contents of my pockets. Indeed, there was nothing I could have taken, for I had brought nothing with me. As I said, I did not plan to remain in the future for more than a day. (I had packed a lunch, but in my haste to get started I had forgotten it.)

Possibly, if there had been no city to beckon me, nor a cemetery to arouse my curiosity, I would have gotten back into my time machine after a brief look around and have returned without further ado to the age where I belong.

Later on, I wished I had.

**T**he position of the sun — it was almost directly above my head — told me it was midday. A warm wind breathing over the land emphasized a fact of which the leaves of the trees and greenness of the grass had already apprised me — that the month was June or July. I congratulated myself on my good fortune, for I might have emerged in the middle of winter. My time machine, you must remember, is but a primitive affair, and while I can program it with respect to space, the time stream remains an unknown river — a river I had set sail upon in much the same manner the ancient Phoenicians had set sail upon the sea.

Indeed, I was not wholly certain I could find my way back to port.

No fence barred my way into the necropolis. The graves simply began where the wild grass left off. They had been arranged in straight lines to and from the city, and were quite close together, but the aisles between them were wide enough to enable me to walk without desecrating any of them with my footsteps. The grass growing upon and between them had been mowed, but not recently, and was in need of another cutting.

The markers were not new; neither were they old. This led me to the conclusion that the dead had been buried over but a brief period of time.

But how could so many people have died almost all at once in just *one* city? And what of all the other cities? There must be hundreds of them. Thousands. Did they, too, have necropolises on their laps?

A plague? A proton storm? No, in all probability a war. But certainly not a nuclear war, for the city still stood intact. Unless cobalt bombs had been used.

But if so, no one would have been left to bury the dead.

I leaned over one of the horizon-tal gravestones to read the inscription. But the stone's face was blank. I looked at a dozen others, with the same result. I looked at the face of one of the old-fashioned tombstones. It, too, was blank.

I did not look further, for it was clear that none of the markers bore names.

Surely, then, there must have been a war — a war that had left so many dead that the task of burying all the bodies had been so herculean it had been impossible to identify each one.

Confronted with so many dead bodies, many peoples in the past would simply have buried them in mass graves. This had, in fact, been done innumerable times. Respect for the inhabitants of this future age rose up in me, and it was with added reassurance that I continued on my way to the city.

It was much farther away than I had thought. My pocket watch told me that almost an hour had gone by since I started out, yet it did not seem to be any closer. I thought of Kafka's Castle. But the analogy did not fit, for I found that the buildings were slightly clearer than they had been, that the wall was more distinct. It was a high wall. As I walked, I wondered why a city that appeared to be modern in other respects should be surrounded by a wall.

But my wonder about the wall was soon superseded by the awe that grew in me with every step I took. It can be likened to that of a space traveler who knows before he leaves Earth that space is vast, but does not truly realize the extent of that vastness till he finds himself in the midst of it.

At this point a faint roar became audible in the distance. As it grew in volume, I was able to make out its source. At first I saw only a dark blur, far to my left, but as it came nearer I saw that it was some kind of a machine. I stopped in my tracks and stared at it. It was about twenty feet wide and six feet high, and there were big wheels on either side. It whined as well as roared, and at length I saw that there were whirling blades beneath it. I knew then that I was looking at a huge lawn mower — one that was bearing directly down upon me!

I began running out of its path, but in my haste I tripped over a grave-stone that protruded slightly above the ground, and went sprawling on my face. I did not try to get to my feet; instead, I rolled the rest of the way out of the juggernaut's path. The wheels missed me by less than an inch, and the whirling blades sprayed me with particles of grass.

I got to my feet, intending to shake my fist at the driver, but there was no driver to be seen. I stared after the machine, upset over my narrow escape; if I had not gotten out of the way, the blades would have chewed me up like a twig.

A vertical tombstone lay in the machine's path. The machine moved all the way up to the tombstone, then mowed around it as closely as it could, after which the machine continued on its way, following the same straight line it had followed before.

Since the machine had shown no such consideration for me, I concluded that the computer that controlled it had been programmed only to recognize stone and was incognizant of human flesh. I waited till the machine was out of sight, then, after brushing off the particles of grass from my breeches and shirt and shaking them out of my hair, I resumed walking toward the city.

The grass beneath my feet was close-cropped now; the lawn mower was working its way outward from the city. Probably by the time it finished the job, the grass it had cut in the beginning would have grown so high it would have to go back and start over again.

A glance at the sun told me it was halfway down the blue slope of the afternoon sky. My throat by now was as dry as old shoe leather, and I cursed myself for not having had the foresight to have brought

a canteen of water with me on my trip. I was hungry, too, and I upbraided myself for having forgotten my lunch.

I was tempted to turn back — not because of my hunger and my thirst, but because of the necropolis itself. The thought of the millions of people who lay dead beneath my feet oppressed me. More than that, it imbued me with a disturbing sense of unreal-ity. How could I alone be alive upon this vast landscape?

But the city was alive, I told my-self. I was close enough to it now to be able to make out the windows in its nearer buildings. They caught the rays of the sun and cast them back like stilettos into my retinas. I saw that the wall had windows, too, and knew then it was not a wall, but an apartment complex — one that had been built, no doubt, to keep pace with the growing population.

Probably it was empty now, for the survivors could not be many. Unless the war or the proton storm or the plague had occurred longer ago than I thought, giving them a chance to multiply.

As I grew closer, I began to *hear* the city. But it did not sound like any city I had ever heard before, for there were no traffic sounds, only the bab-ble of many voices, some of them lift-ed in song. This, taken in conjunction with the fact that I had seen no roads, would seem to indicate that there was no traffic to hear. But the nonex-istence of roads within my present purview did not mean that there were none, and the absence of traffic sounds could mean that in this day and age vehicles made no sound.

The roar the lawn mower had made, however, did not hear this out.

And then I heard another sound — a pleasant, nostalgic sound that came from but a short distance away. *Snip-snip. Snip-snip. Snip-snip.* I saw the girl then. She was kneeling beside a nearby tombstone, clipping the grass the mower had missed with a pair of grass shears. She saw me at the same time I saw her, and smiled and got to her feet and walked toward me.

**S**he wore a brightly patterned dirndl dress that fell below her knees, and sandals. Her hair was long and black, her cheeks were rosy. Her nose, although slightly aquiline, did not in the least conflict with the fullness of her lips or diminish the warmth that had come into her deep, dark eyes.

Coming up to me, she said, "Wel-come to our city."

Languages change radically over the years, and I had feared that Eng-lish by this time would be far beyond my comprehension. Yet it had not changed at all. "Thank you," I said.

"I suspect you must be bewil-dered."

My eyes must have betrayed me. "I don't believe I've ever seen so many graves."

"Yes, they are legion. My name is Elizabeth."

"Keith." Since she had not added her surname, I did not bother to add mine.

I asked a question to which I had already guessed the answer: "Why is it that none of the graves are marked with the names of the dead?"

"There were so many bodies to bury that names were dispensed with. Come with me to the city, Keith — I'm all through work for the day. I'll update you on the way."

Could she somehow have surmised from my question and from the be-wilderment in my eyes, I wondered, that I was a denizen of a different age? I found this difficult to believe. Nevertheless, it was clear she had guessed I was a stranger.

She chose one aisle between the graves, and I chose the next one to it, and we began walking toward the city. "Everything you need to know," she said across the graves, "was writ-ten down long ago in the Apocalypse, although all of it as yet has not come true. And Saint John the Divine erred with respect to the Battle of Arma-geddon. It wasn't fought between the forces of good and the forces of evil — it was fought between the living and the dead."

"Armageddon?"

"Yes. But it was more than a mere battle — it was a war."

"The — dead rose up?"

"Only those who had died during the millenium, which began in 1914 and ended in 2914. Most rose up in a single night twenty-some years ago."

"How *could* they have risen up?"

"Haven't you ever read the Reve-lation of Saint John the Divine?"

"Of course I have."

"Then you already know the an-swer. When it happened, naturally the living were appalled. 'There's no more room!' they cried. 'Go back to your graves!' But of course the dead would not, and it was then that the Battle of Armageddon took place." She made a sweeping gesture toward the graves. "The losers lie in peace."

As a man of science, I had always looked upon the Revelation of Saint John the Divine as the ravings of a madman. In my scientific opinion, Swinburne, when he wrote that "dead men rise up never," stated an un-equivocal truth. So I did not, of course, believe what Elizabeth had said about the dead rising from their graves, although I had to admit that her gruesome tale served to explain the presence of the necropolis.

But now, if nothing else, I at least knew approximately how far into the future I had come — unless she had also lied about the date.

"The Common Council," she re-marked, "is debating whether or not to remove the vertical tombstones and to replace them with the com-mon stone plaques like those on the other graves. I think it would be a good idea." She held up her shears. "Then the mower *could* cut *all* the grass and eliminate the need for these. Since the dead are honestly arranged, it was absurd to use conspicuous markers on some of the graves in the first place."

Yes. Absurd. As absurd as the tale she had told me.

I began to see other people. They were engaged in the same task as that pursued by Elizabeth when I first saw her. There were a few children, too. They were playing in the aisles be-tween the graves. Many of the adults were old, but all of them, young and old alike, had rosy cheeks. Some of them waved to me. I waved back. The diversity of their apparel intrigued me. It was as though a revolt in fa-shion, similar to the one that had occurred in the 1960's, had taken place.

My thirst by this time was next to unbearable, and I resolved to head for the nearest drinking fountain the moment we entered the city. But when at last we passed through a hia-tus in the apartment complex into one of the city's streets, I saw no sign of one.

But I saw people. Hundreds of them. Thousands. They filled the street. They stood in doorways. They leaned out of windows. No wonder, assuming for the moment that Elizabeth's tale was true, there had been no room for the dead!

The buildings were in a sad state of disrepair. Many of their windows were broken, and their facades brought to mind the faces of old men. None were nearly as towering as the twentieth-century buildings I was fa-miliar with.

I now knew why I had not heard the sound of traffic. There was none to hear. This despite the fact that the street along which Elizabeth con-ducted me was wide enough to ac-commodate four lanes of cars.

I did not ask Elizabeth why there were none, or why there was no vis-ible sign of transportation of any oth-er kind. She had already told me enough lies.

At this point an old man clad in slacks and shirt and sneakers walked up to me and stared into my face. I stared into his, shaken by a feeling of *deja vu*. I could have sworn I had seen his face before, but for the life of me I could not remember where.

He stared at me only for a mo-ment, then smiled and went on his way. I knew of course that he must be an utter stranger. But why the *deft vu*, and why had he stared at me?

At length Elizabeth led me side-ways through the crowd to the wide doorway of one of the buildings. We stepped into a large, littered lobby. There were elevators — three of them, in fact — on the wall opposite the entrance, but apparently they did not work, for she began leading me up successive flights of stairs, wedging her way through the people who sat upon the steps. I followed her like a stray dog; I did not know what else to do.

"Since there are no rooms availa-ble anywhere in the city," she ex-plaind on one of the landings, "You will have to share mine."

It had been on the tip of my tongue to ask her if there was a restaurant in the building, but both her words and the matter-of-fact way she had spoken them put my unspoken ones to rout. I am not in the least Prufrockian, but I had always assumed that the sexual freedom rampant in my own time was a mere evolutionary phase, and that it would soon give way to a more civilized form of behavior. The discovery that it still existed almost a millennium in my future had caught me completely off guard.

I do not know how many flights of stairs we ascended; I can only say all of them, for her room proved to be on the topmost floor. She led me down a dusty corridor to its door. The corridor had a musty smell. So, for that matter, did the entire building. All of the rooms we passed seemed to be occupied; at least I heard voices coming from within. Her room proved to be just that. I, who had expected to see at least a makeshift apartment, stared at the room's mildewed walls, at the cobwebs hanging from its ceiling, at the three sad-looking pieces of furniture it contained: a straight-backed wooden chair, a battered vanity with a cracked mirror, and a broken-down bed with only a mattress to its name. A single window in the wall opposite the door provided a view of the late afternoon sky.

She stepped to one side so that I could precede her through the doorway. She did not follow me. Instead, she said, still standing in the corridor, "I'll leave you here for now, and go and inform the members of the council of your presence. Tonight some of them will come back with me and examine you."

"What in the world for?"

She smiled, revealing even rows of teeth so white they glowed, even in the gloom. "It has to be officially determined whether you are alive or dead."

I remembered that she had said *most* of the dead had risen up from their graves in a single night. Apparently, then, the process was still going on. Good Lord! — did she think there was a possibility that I had just risen from mine? Shaken, I said, "I thought you'd already made the determination."

"Yes." She smiled again. "And I'm certain I'm right. But the decision has to be made officially. So good-bye for now, Keith — I'll see you later," and before I could stop her, she closed the door and locked it behind her.

I walked partway across the dusty floor and sat down on the chair. I assured myself that even if her gruesome tale were true, I had nothing to fear, because I was alive.

I found myself staring at the bed. It did not look as though anyone had ever slept on it. The mattress was as mildewed as the walls and gave forth a moldy smell. Did she really sleep on the horrid thing?

I was tempted to go through the drawers of the vanity, but the rigid set of values I have always lived by prevented me from doing so.

Probably when the council members came, one of them would feel for my heartbeat by pressing his fingers against my carotid artery. Thank God I was alive!

I caught myself up. I was a sober, sane, and sensible man — and sober, sane, and sensible men do not believe in resurrection. They especially do not believe in it on a worldwide scale.

I had heard a tale told by a mad-woman.

I drew the chair over to the window, which was open, and sat down again, placing my elbows on the sill. The window was on the east side of the building, but there was another street below. It, too, was filled with people. The building's shadows had brought on an early twilight, and the people were wandering up and down the street in the crepuscular light.

Why didn't any of them go home to dinner?

The thought of food did more than reawaken my appetite, it reminded me of my thirst. The moment Elizabeth came back with the council members, I would demand both food and water.

The buildings across the street were not nearly as tall as this one. Below me and across the way, I could see other people looking out the windows, or leaning through them and looking down into the street.

Didn't anyone have anything to do?

I raised my eyes. I found that I could see over the building tops to the rest of the plain, which the city had hidden from my view. I half expected to see a second necropolis, or an extension of the first, but I

did not. Instead, I saw a sea of tents.

There were thousands and thou-sands of them. They spread out seem-ingly to the horizon itself, and to left and to right to the limit of my gaze. In the nearer distance I could make out people moving among them.

For a long while I sat there staring at the darkening plain.

When at length I brought my gaze — and myself, too, for that matter —back to my immediate surroundings, I saw that darkness filled the street below and that the people were car-rying torches. In the windows across the way, I saw the flickering of can-dlelight. I refused to believe that ev-en a city as deteriorated as this one no longer had electricity, and I felt my way through the darkness of the room to the door and felt the wall on either side of the jambs in search of a switch. I did not find one.

I remembered then that I had not seen a single streetlight and that the room possessed neither a ceiling bulb nor a lamp. Electricity, then, must have been superseded by a more ad-vanced and far subtler form of illum-ination. But what had happened to it?

The window, lighted by the torch-light from the street, formed a pale rectangle in the darkness. I returned to it and sat back down in the chair and looked down once more at the people in the street.

Sometimes some of them would look upward, and despite the inter-vening distance and with only torch-light to go by, I could see that some-thing had gone wrong with their faces. I raised my eyes to the windows across the street. One of the people looking out of them must have sensed my gaze, for he looked up at me. His eyes were burning holes in his skull, and his face had fallen away.

A number of the people in the street began to sing. I recognized the tune. The words, which they sang with zestful abandon, dated from my childhood:

Did you ever think when the hearse went by  
That someday you are going to die? ...

They'll wrap you up in a woolen sheet,  
And cover you over from head to feet.

Freed at last from my misconcep-tion, I smelled their rotted flesh.  
I heard footsteps in the hall.

No doubt you are wondering (said the Time Traveler), if you have thus far believed a word I have said, how I conceivably could have walked with my eyes wide open into a city of the dead and not have known it. Or how, for that matter, I could have looked at Elizabeth and not have known at once that she was not truly alive.

The answer is simple: By day, the dead are alive. It is only with the coming of night that their false flesh falls away.

The living did not rebury the dead, as I had thought. The dead buried the living. For how could the living have won the so-called Battle of Armaged-don when the foes they sought to kill were in one sense already dead?

Why the meticulous burials? Why the dedicated maintenance of the ne-cropolis — dedicated to a point where an electronic lawn mower represents the only machine they did not get rid of?

The answer to that is simple, too: Being dead, they revere the dead.  
And, being dead, they hate the living.

The council members who stood outside the door would not try to find my heartbeat—far from it. Their examination would be purely visual. The moment they discovered I was not dead, they would take steps to see to it that I was.

When the door opened I saw four figures in the corridor. One of them was Elizabeth's. I knew because of the dirndl dress that hung upon her in tatters. She carried a candle. I looked away from her ghastly face and pushed my way through the oth-er three bags of bones and ran down the stairs, forcing my way through the living corpses that sat upon the steps.

I fought my way through the walk-ing dead to the edge of the city, brea-thing through my mouth to avoid the unspeakable stench. This time when I crossed the necropolis, I did not care in my haste whether or not I stepped upon the graves. You see me here be-fore you, so you know that I made it back. Now you can return to your of-fices and write your tongue-in-cheek articles for your newspapers—or, if you like, transcribe my words from your tapes.

You might add, if you do not tran-scribe them, that I am going back. Oh yes. But not right away. This time I am going to make the journey in a different kind of time machine.

How do I know I am going back? The answer to that is simple, too: I saw myself in the city of the dead.

But there is no need for you to be envious of my resurrection, for soon-er or later you will make the journey, too, and you also will rise from your graves. So good-bye for now, gentle-men. See you later.