

# The Present Eternal

by Barry N. Malzberg

SO ARNOLD POTTERLEY WENT HOME. WHERE, AFTER ALL, WAS there to go? If there was nowhere to hide, then you might at least be uncomfortable, squirm under the knowledge of complete exposure where, at least, you were most comfortable.

At least, that was Potterley's way of rationalizing this ultimate disaster. Others had different views, of course. Nimmo went to the outback. Foster went insane.

I have been asked to write a history of the world after the chronoscope. This is a great honor, of course. I am being honored in that request. It is not so long that I have been writing, after all, first numbers and then for a long time the alphabet, until at last I began to feel more secure with words and phrases and then whole sentences; still this is a big leap for me. "If you do not do it, Jorg, who will do it?" I have been told, rather asked, but this does not honor so much as it frightens me. Many things frighten me of course; the chronoscope taught us to be afraid of everything. The chronoscope taught us common sense. The chronoscope taught us the true way of the world. "Jorg" is not real, is my *nom*, as they say, *de plumay*.

Caroline Potterley waited for months after she could have done it to finally bring the machine into her home, seek her dead daughter, Laurel. To see her again, to know the little girl as she had been had constituted the final passion of her life and yet when it was possible at last, when Arnold had insisted and Foster had made that thing and the time-viewer, for reasons she had never understood had escaped to the entire world...when that opportunity was, at last, hers, Caroline found herself in thrall, held back, locked against her own desire. She knew that once she brought in the machine and everyone was doing it now, Arnold refused but how could he have stopped her?, once she used the controls and instructions and found her dead daughter she would fall and fall, plunge into something, some quality of emotion which she had never known...and it was the need to *fight* against this stricture, to fight against that last and terrible plunge which caused her to hold back but there came finally that point at which she could no longer resist.

"I can't hold back any longer, Arnold," she would have said if they had still been talking in these months, but they were not. Arnold was never home except to sleep and sometimes even not at night, he wandered around in grief and shock, pulling at the pockets of his suit jackets and finishing the small bottles of wine which case by case he brought in and bottle by bottle he drained. So she did not say this to him, merely made the necessary arrangements which were easy to do in this strange and terrible world which had evolved, and opened the viewer to her history, to that time before the fire when

—When she had had a little girl laughing and tumbling in the corridors of her life, when she and Laurel had told one another secrets which now she could not, somehow, remember.

This is my partial history of the world after the chronoscope, then. No one can write the full history, who has the time? Who has the tools? It was the criminal, the necessary part of our lives. I am making some of this up. I am imagining some of this as the way it should have been. No one who was there at the time bothered to write it down or to put it in final form, it is left to me to make it up as best I can. That is what was said to me, "Make it up as best you can. If it seems to fit, then make it fit. There are no truths. What is truth? What can truth be? Set it down as you see fit. " And so on and so forth in this difficult and imperfect time. I was talking about who used it first. Who is to say who used it first? All of them did, everyone did. But I think it must have been the thieves and lowlifes who perceived its lesser possibilities, those dedicated to the transcendent and the bravest view of matters who would have adapted the chronoscope first, not the leaders of nations but those who toiled in the outskirts of the nations. For them the chronoscope would yield a kind of eternal present through which they could scamper gratefully, thoughtfully, seeking grander device. Who else could it have been? It was these visionaries of course, who first made use of the device. This is no surprise, those like Potterley are always ahead of the herd in their willingness to try new and different means.

Of course everyone, theoretically, who used the timeviewer was a criminal by fiat; we are talking (notice how easily I slide into the voice of authority and generalization, that pontifical “we,” but I have been reading many of the old texts in preparation for this assignment and in order to find the proper approach) rather of professionals, those who considered it already an occupation. Secret combinations, long-buried hiding places, crevices containing the untaxed unconverted profits...all of these were easily available to a patient and understanding scan.

Crimes of violence and passion, surprisingly, diminished; the chronoscope made passion and violence vicariously available to the widest, most eager audience and the pre-chronoscope sex lives of the famous and desired were—well, they were most famous and desired.

In the viewer, then, in that narrow and focused tube of memory, Laurel waved at her, skipped to the bottom of the slide and began her tumbling ascent, in the shafts of indifferent late afternoon light (it must have been that first October they had the slide, Laurel’s teeth were uneven and the dress she wore had been somehow lost after one season, Caroline remembered this, she remembered everything) she seemed ever more vulnerable as she rose and yet somehow, mixed with the vulnerability, there was a toughness, a security of effort, a determination which would have fifteen years later, maybe less, made her a fearsome young woman. Caroline could see that strength, could take it for the moment into herself and knowing that, knowing that the twenty-year-old Laurel would have been able to direct circumstance as Caroline never could, gave her a sudden and shuddering moment of insight, of possibility, which in the thin gray light cast from the viewer seemed to cast her up very much as Laurel herself seemed to rise, seemed to lock them into some passionate and savage assertion which could, in that moment, reach out from the constricted space of the viewer and become, almost become, the world.

One year after the particulars of chronoscopy appeared on a popular science program any dummy could have figured out, your Tiffany, who thought of herself still as lost in the darkness of crime, walked into the home of Paul Taber, owner of half the casinos in Miami. There was no need to fear the presence of Taber or anyone else; she had cleared that. She had watched Taber and his fifth wife leave and, furthermore, she had watched them take a last look, *another* little security peek for them at the jewels and cash that a careful scan through the years had shown them so industriously accumulating right up to that point, twelve hours earlier, where they had secured the house (no problem for Tiffany) and left on a long, sudden, necessary trip.

On the way to the safe with the real stuff, humming a little song of accomplishment, Tiffany picked up a few bangles here and a few baubles over there, working from the map of the premises she had sketched out so carefully, so industriously, put them into her little sack. Just as she scampered toward the safe, she saw the shadows against the window and then a rough, clumsy but manifestly accomplished thug came into the light and stared at her. He seemed to be holding a sack of his own.

“I hadn’t thought of this,” Tiffany said.

“Who are you?” the thug asked.

“But I should have thought of it,” Tiffany said. “I mean, it doesn’t show the future, right?”

“What future?” the thug said. “*This* is the future. Okay, hand over the stuff.”

“It’s mine,” she said stupidly. “I worked for it.”

The thug pulled out a gun and pointed it with easy accomplishment at a dangerous area of Tiffany’s chest. “You didn’t work hard enough,” he said.

“Protestant ethic,” Tiffany said pointlessly. “I was here first, anyway.”

“But I’m here *now*. And I can open that safe as easy as you. Easier. I know the combination.”

“So do I.”

“The viewer,” he said. Understanding flooded the thug’s features; he appeared, suddenly, years younger and more alert. It did wonders for his complexion, too. “You have one of those things, too. You can look at the past.”

“I’m also patient and careful,” Tiffany said. “If you had done any real research at all instead of grabbing one of those ten-cent viewers and spinning the dials, you would have seen that there’s a spot in

this place which has an alarm hooked up directly to headquarter, five minutes away. And you're standing on it, dummy."

"You're just trying to get me to leave. "

"Would I try to scare you for no reason? A colleague? We'd better get out of here, pal."

"You mean, like me first," the thug said. " And leave you to clean out the place on your own. No, not without that stuff I'm not going." He brandished the gun.

Tiffany shrugged; Baubles and bangles, yes, but the supply was infinite. It was as infinite as time. Didn't he understand this? The arena had become vastly more open; the walls had been taken down. "Take them," she said generously, passing handfuls. She walked toward a window. "I've got three other places on the list and that's just for tonight."

The thug stood, clutching jewelry, his features fallen into their more accustomed places, his eyes stunned and blinking. "You're so sure" he said, "so sure of everything." He looked at the gun over which a necklace had been casually draped. "I never had your opportunities," he said.

"But we *all* have opportunities now," Tiffany said. "Don't you understand?" She almost did. She was closing in on it all the time, she was on the verge of terrific insight. Insight was all you needed to function in this world now, all the rest was just *stuff* "It's getting so easy it's boring. It's almost like it doesn't count any more."

"I count," the thug said. Some people kept on insisting. Who could blame them?

"That's because you think any of this old stuff still matters," Tiffany said. She went through the window. This is a reasonable approximation of how it was, I think.

"Come away, Caroline," Arnold said. His whisper, sepulchral and unexpected behind her, was a gunshot. She trembled, shook, turned toward him, saw his features suddenly grotesque and brutalized in the odd and terrible flickering light of the chronoscope.

"Get away!" she said. She felt fear course through her; oddly it energized rather than shriveled, she wanted to leap at him suddenly. If they could finally touch

He reached forward, touched her wrist, pulled at it. "It's horrible, Caroline," he whispered. "You must stop this, you can't hide, you can't go away, you have to face this—Carthage *burned*," he said. "I know it now, they set fires, they killed—"

"Go away!" she said again. "I want to look—"

"She's dead," Arnold said. "I didn't know it at first, *I* had to look too, yes I did, I went to the library even after everything I told you and I stared for hours, but there comes a time, Caroline, you have to let it go; she's no longer ours, she's no one's, she's lost to us, lost to everything but the machine. Caroline, we can't be like so many, we have to get out of the room, we have to have a *life*"

He reached forward to disconnect the machine and she did something then, moved, began to deal with him as she must, but after this her recollection was not as clear and she did not want to use the machine to recover that moment, she would let it rest, let all of it rest, only Laurel, his Carthage, his burning...

You do not have to give so many details, they tell me. They have looked at this and in some ways they make the good sounds and in other ways the bad sounds but what they want to make most clear is that it is not necessary to be as precise as I have been—that is the word they use, "precise"—it is only important to give what they call "an overview." "Give an overview," they say. "We have no time, no space, no room for history, we have only an ever-living and continual present, but that present, although it serves us well, must have the slightest amount of justification. If you can give us this, you have given enough." Who knows "enough"? I have my own plans and abilities.

I am the first and the last, the only one to give this history, they tell me, the only one to "write" as "writing" is understood in the oldstyle, but I must keep it tightly confined, must control. I do what I can. "Give an overview," they say, but it is not the over but the under which possesses me, the weight of all that has happened almost obliterating (that is a tough word, "obliterating") that tiny corridor of light I cast toward our history.

It took what remained of law enforcement (that which hadn't gone crooked itself) quite a while to catch up with the outlaws, but when they did, it was all over for the criminal element. No unsolved crimes, no unresolved, unidentifiable remains. You couldn't even skip school...that is, if your settlement still had access to instruction of any kind. They knew when you were sleeping. They knew when you were awake. They knew if you'd been bad or good.

"Late meeting. That Ryan account. Should have been here hours ago, I'm sorry. "

"Don't tell me 'Ryan account.' Who *is* that blond bitch on the third floor of 242 Oak Street?"

"What? What?"

"For someone who says he can't do a lot of things any more, you can do a lot of things, can't you?"

"But the account—the Ryan meeting—"

"Forget it, Frank. You're trying to live in a world which doesn't exist any more. Buy a chronoscope and get out of the house. Because tomorrow the locks are changed and you can't pick up *that* kind of detail work on any cheap set you 're likely to get. "

When the feelings passed, when she could focus again, see where she was, Caroline saw something had happened to Arnold, something dreadful had happened, he was lying on the floor in a quiescence she had never known him to have before. But even as she struggled with the impulse to kneel, comfort, hold, help him in some way, call for emergency aid, get the university services there, even as she thought of this, a small and infinitely wise voice within her said, *He's never looked this peaceful before, he has been granted perfect peace, the peace that Laurel has. Go to her, go to her again now, understand her peace and try to make it her own, and the voice was so utterly attuned to her own necessity*, Caroline knew she could do no more, could do nothing for Arnold that had not perished long ago, in the fire, beyond the fire, and turned instead toward the chronoscope, the chronoscope where Laurel, infinitely young, tender, wise, patient

Where Laurel would tell her what; if anything, to do.

Procreation became limited, hurried, and—for those who persisted—bizarre. The governments, all of them, China and the Soviet Union and Burundi and Burma, South Africa and Zaire collapsed. Government of any kind was simply unimaginable. There was a futile attempt in some of the countries to confiscate chronoscopes, but that is when the murders began and, having made their point, soon enough stopped: the systems, such as they were, had become invested in the chronoscope, behavior had become circumscribed by its existence. Sixty years after Ralph Nimmo, uncle of the luckless Foster, had turned loose the plans, fled to Australia to successfully impersonate a keeper of aboriginal kangaroos (Foster meanwhile reinventing chronoscopy in custody, creating it over and over again), there wasn't much public left, and that which lasted was *old*, decrepit, and resentful of medical facilities and research which had become bare holding operations. There were localities with severely deteriorated communications. There was, always, the chronoscope. "Here it *is*," Foster said, handing scribblings to the attendants. "*Take it.*"

After a century and a quarter, only a few clots and clans existed in the southern regions of the northern hemispheres, the northern regions of the southern. For this remainder, subsistence level in a subsistence society wasn't all that oppressive, and there was, of course, the chronoscope, whose limited range was nonetheless able to disclose in all of its fury and chiaroscuro beauty the collapse of Eastern and Western civilizations the century before, and all of the fragmentary, diminished copulation and confrontation associated with that collapse.

And so, hunched against circumstance, appalled by the news of her father's death but nonetheless loving and filled with tenderness, Laurel reached out from the interstices of the machine, reached from the dark metal and said to Caroline, "I'll tell you what to do, oh mother, I'll tell you just what you need to do but you have to come closer, come closer—"

As Caroline crept down that corridor of informative light.

I am the first of a long line to come who again will be able to compose our history. But our history is tense and exhausting, narrow and dangerous, and I see now why they wished me to be explicit, to

compress, to hurry along; there is only a little left to tell but nonetheless

“Remember how you loved him,” Laurel said. “Remember how it was when you came to him for the first time, remember that mantle of love and warmth—”

“What we’ll do,” said Joan, an impassioned sixteen-year-old, “is run away. “

“The others will see us. They’ll be able to watch every move.” Bill was eighteen, the levelheaded, farseeing part of the relationship. Or so he told Joan. There weren’t enough their age around to argue for much differences, though. Anyone between fifteen or twenty was mostly the same. Timorous. Except for Joan who had a kind of spirit which was unaccountable and who had plans.

“We’ll go so far away the old bastards won’t be able to get there. No one will even look, all they want to do is stare and remember, anyway. We’ll climb mountains.”

“No matter how far we go, they’ll still be able to watch anything we do. They’ll see everything.”

“I don’t care. Who cares? Let them watch! They can watch us until I die if they want to. I want kids,” she said passionately, looking at him in that way which so dangerously upset him. “I want a family. I want to have”—she paused—“abandoned sex. *Real* sex.”

Bill was timorous but needful. “Yes,” he said. “I do, too. But—”

“If you don’t go with me, I’ll ask someone else. I’ll ask Dave.”

“Dave? He’s thirty years old. He’s one of them. All he wants to do is look. “

“I’ll teach him a few things. He can be taught. There aren’t many of us left, don’t you know that? Do you want the whole world to die?”

“It’s already dead.”

“I mean *really* die. Die out. No more children, nothing. Not even the machines. Most of those damned viewers don’t even work any more, they haven’t been tended in years.”

“There are probably fertile individuals in other clans. It doesn’t fall only to us. There have got to be others—”

“Do you want it to end this way, then? Don’t you want me—”

“Well, *sure* I want you,” Bill said hopelessly. “I guess I do, anyway. But there will always be someone looking at us, even after everyone here dies. “

“No there won’t.”

“Our own children will. “

“Those machines are breaking down, I told you. We won’t even take one. Let me tell you a secret. I smashed all of them around I could find.”

“Joan! When?”

“Just before.”

“They’ll kill us when they find out.”

“So I don’t care,” she said. She seized his wrists. “Now you *know* we’ve got to do something. You know we’ve got to go away.”

“How many did you break?”

“A lot. Rust will take care of the rest of them, and I don’t think any of the clan are smart enough to build them again. Don’t you understand? I think they’re really finished with them, now. I think it’s run out.”

Bill felt her pulling him along. Soon they would be out of the hutch, on level ground, and they could run. Forge from the land, build a settlement. Well, it sounded possible. Anything was possible. Joan was right, no one was going to follow them. They just weren’t that interested. “No more of them?” Bill said hopefully. “You mean, no more of the machines?”

“I think not. But to be extra specially certain, just in case any instructions *do* survive in our new place, we won’t teach our kids to read.”

“Will it work?”

She smiled. “Oh, for a while,” she said. “Eventually one of them will learn to write and maybe put all

of this down again, but by then it will be too late. And we'll be free."

And in the machine, in that swath of light Laurel had helped her cleave from the darkness Caroline saw them as it had been that night, the first night Arnold had known her, the night Arnold had loved her. She watched the bodies struggle, then slide in and amongst the shining spokes of light and then, in slow and terrible concert, the scene shifted, reassembled, and Caroline saw herself huge and arched against that wedge of vision as she struck the blow which killed Arnold, watched him collapse against her in that parody of embrace, and then the two of them locked, were rolling and rolling on the floor in and amongst the plans, the diagrams, the wires, the nest of that awful machinery. "Oh Laurel," Caroline Potterly said. "Oh Laurel, oh Laurel..."

And the fires of Carthage came.