

Line to Tomorrow

by Henry Kuttner

"Acknowledging. The initial steps have been accomplished. I am now fitted satisfactorily into the basic sociological pattern."

"Good. The contact is established. From time to time directions and guidance will be issued, Korys-"

The telephone rang. Fletcher kept his eyes shut and pretended not to hear it. He tried to recapture a rather pleasant dream, but the insistent shrilling would not stop. His time-sense was sufficiently warped by half-sleep so that the intervals between the rings seemed to stretch pleasantly into interminable minutes. Then tr-r-r-ranggg!

Finally he slid out of bed, fumbled his way across the room and, after a brief altercation with the door, located the telephone. He picked it up and muttered an inarticulate something.

"Korys," a voice said. "Is that you?"

"Wrong number," Fletcher growled, but before he could replace the receiver, the voice went on.

"Good. For a while I couldn't make contact. There was a temporal storm-at least, we think that was it-though it might have been the creeps shifting. You know how difficult it is to maintain a circuit like this-what took you so long to answer?"

There was a long pause of dead silence. Fletcher, drunk with sleep, swayed on his feet, too drowsy to take the receiver from his ear.

The voice said, "Couldn't hear me? That's odd. But you can now, eh? Well, you'd better start making notes for your thesis. Here's an instruction: Buy Transsteel now, sell in two days. That will give you currency for your needs."

Silence. Then-

"Yes. But remember to be unobtrusive. And don't felk the sorkins, if you can avoid it."

The silence lengthened. Fletcher, murmuring something about practical jokes, hung up and went back to bed, where he managed to dream about felked sorkins. They looked rather like pickles dressed in gay red jackets, but their eyes were blue. By the time the creeps shifted-spiderly creatures they were, rushing like lemmings down the beaches-Fletcher woke up with a headache and a mild hangover. Silently cursing his own imagination, he went feebly into the bathroom and revived himself with a cool shower. He shaved, arranged a makeshift breakfast, and read the morning newspaper. Transsteel, he noticed, was at 281/4.

He went down to the advertising agency where he worked, made a few abortive passes at layouts, and had a stroke of good luck in dating Cynthia Dale, who wrote fashion and perfume copy. Cynthia was a lovely redhead,

with expensive tastes and a capacity for liquor that Fletcher found surprising. They met after work and had dinner; Fletcher enjoyed himself thoroughly. A mild headache wore off in the course of the evening, and Cynthia unbent more than usual. He woke the next morning with a hazy memory of Cynthia's head on his shoulder and her husky voice reciting a list of synonyms for fragrant.

"Aromatic," Fletcher suggested.

"Shut up, Jerry. I've almost got the right word-"

"So have I," Fletcher said, lifting his glass. "Nuts."

This time the telephone didn't ring until eight A.M. By then Fletcher was downing coffee, carefully avoiding sudden motions. His head had been stuffed with moldy hay; not only could he taste it, but it had packed down inside his skull and felt awful. The sudden ringing sent lightening flashing behind Fletcher's eyes.

"G-g-g ... yeah," he said, lifting the receiver.

"Good morning, Korys," the voice said brightly. "Though it's night here, of course. Did you buy the Transsteel?"

"What kind of screwy gag is this?" Fletcher asked in thick fury. "I don't-"

"Sell it tomorrow, then," the voice directed. "At a hundred and seven. How do you like the people?"

"I hate the people!" Fletcher snarled, but apparently the other party didn't hear.

"Coryza was fairly common then. If we could transport whole bodies, he could immunize them, but you've got to take the body you get-though we generally locate fairly healthy ones. If you'd been majoring in medicine, we might have chosen a diseased body for you, but since it's socio-economics with you-"

Fletcher clicked the phone, but the connection wasn't broken. "-get rid of it," the voice said cheerfully. "Use this. It's a cure for coryza and several other minor things. One ounce sodium chloride, a pinch of baking soda-" It listed a few ingredients. "That should do it. Goodby, and good luck."

"Gah," said Fletcher inarticulately. He decided to get in touch with the phone company if this continued. Having madmen call for one-sided conversations every morning was a depressing prospect. Even without a hangover. Reminded of the Armageddon in his head, Fletcher went into the kitchen looking for tomato juice. There wasn't any. Giddy nausea lurched through him as he straightened from the refrigerator. He could feel the creeps shifting. At least, it felt that way.

He picked up the saltcellar and examined it thoughtfully. Sodium chloride. What the devil was that mixture the voice had recommended? Coryza-well, he didn't have a cold, but his head ached, his bones pained, and he was profoundly depressed. That stuff wouldn't kill him. He hoped.

Fletcher had a slight tendency to hypochondria, stimulated, perhaps, by the increasing frequency of his headaches. Therefore he found it impossible to resist trying new remedies. The various ingredients were all available, but he had never heard of mixing such things together. It was green, it effervesced, and the taste was vile. Nevertheless Fletcher drank it, if only to stop the creeps.

Ten seconds later he set down the glass and blinked at nothing. He shook his head experimentally.

No creeps.

It couldn't happen. An instantaneous cure for a monumental hangover was an obvious impossibility. But Fletcher's hangover was gone, headache and all. He felt fine.

"I'll be damned," he said softly. Then he snatched for paper and pencil and jotted down the ingredients of the cure-all as a precaution against forgetfulness. He held up his hand and watched its steadiness with disbelieving eyes.

Somebody had been very helpful.

No one at the office would admit to telephoning Jerry Fletcher that morning. It had been a man's voice, he remembered, but Cynthia's husky tones might have been sufficiently deceptive. He asked her. She denied everything and seemed ill-tempered. Obviously if Cynthia knew the magical way of curing a hangover, she wouldn't have one now.

There was, however, a newspaper on her desk, and Fletcher took it back with him to his office. The financial news interested him. But Transsteel had dropped three and a quarter points: it was at 25 now. And the general news didn't indicate that there would be any unexpected shift in supply and demand that would boost the stock overnight. Fletcher shrugged, decided to take the gifts the gods offered, and began to work on a layout for pretzels.

The next morning the telephone rang again.

The voice said, "Hello, Korys. Don't forget Transsteel. It'll drop before noon."

Fletcher said, "Can you hear me?"

"Well, in your own home-but don't let it out. The stuff's dangerous without a control. But it's fair enough, no reason why you shouldn't be comfortable. This is a field trip, not an initiation."

"Hello ... you! Korys!"

"Then here's the equation." Fletcher reached for a pencil and copied rapidly as the voice dictated. He didn't know some of the technical terms, so he spelled them out. Mathematical symbols weren't up his alley.

"Quite all right," the voice said cheerfully. "I'll expect a good thesis from you when you get back. Watch those sorkins, boy." There was a laugh and

a faint click. Fletcher waited a moment, hung up, and began masticating his thumbnail.

Then he called the telephone company and asked questions. They said they'd check up. Fletcher was beginning to think they wouldn't find anything amiss. That term field trip had switched his thought on to a new track. He re-examined the equation, but found no light there. Maybe-

Abstractedly he dressed, gulped coffee, and went to the office. At noon he arranged to lunch with Dr. Sawtelle, a technician who worked for a huge commercial company that maintained an account with the advertising agency. Sawtelle was a skinny, gray-haired man with probing blue eyes.

"Where'd you get it?" he wanted to know.

"I'd rather not say just yet. All I want to know-"

Sawtelle studied the equation. "But this is ridiculous. You can't ... of course you can't!" He began talking about half-time and alloy properties, using a jargon that left Fletcher baffled.

"Does it make sense?"

"No," Sawtelle said. "At least ... well, no. Look. I'd like to take this with me. I want to look up some references. It might mean something at that."

"Copy it," Fletcher suggested. Sawtelle did so. And that ended the discussion, for the nonce.

The newspaper listed Transsteel at 271/2. That didn't make much sense either. Fletcher shrugged, finagled a date with Cynthia, and forgot the whole matter till he got back to his apartment shortly before dawn. He was very drunk, but the miraculous hangover-cure remedied that. He turned on the radio as he undressed.

Presently it said, "-home of Dr. Andrew Sawtelle, research chemist. The building was totally destroyed by the blast. Entire family were killed-"

Fletcher reached out, turned off the radio, and sat looking at nothing until the telephone rang.

The voice was slightly distressed. "Haven't much time. Daki's in trouble. I knew when he flunked his psych conditioning course ... eh? Oh, felking the sorkins-naturally! So he's due to be burned at the stake unless-he would choose the Spanish Inquisition as his major. We could simply bring him back to this time, but it would mean a low mark for him. If I can get him out of it some other way, I will."

Silence. Fletcher waited, his back and sides cool and wet.

"Not important, no. Did the Transsteel-eh? Well, fifteen thousand was good money in those days. What? ... Election bets. Yes. They were a social phenomenon in that time. Just a fleck; I've the reference here ... Browning will be next president. Be careful not to win every wager, though. You don't want to arouse too much interest. You'll be graded on how unobtrusively you adjust to the social pattern, remember."

Pause.

"Exhibitionism isn't out of place in that era. You might arrange to lose an election bet, just to be on the safe side-" Silence again, then laughter. "Fine. Take him up on it. You'll look interesting riding a horse into the Waldorf-Astoria's lobby. Go ahead; you should learn about the normal eccentricities of the time, and certainly that's mild enough-you should spend a few days in 1986 some time and study the Lemming Craze-mass suicides, like the dancing manias of the Middle Ages. Go ahead and make the bet."

Fletcher moistened his lips. His head was beginning to ache again. When the voice spoke after another pause, the subject had apparently been changed.

"Fine. Embryo Korys is thriving. He'll be viable in two months. You must meet his mother some time. She used to visit the incubator every week till she was assigned to Polar Weather study. But I really haven't time, Korys, I must look after Daki. Good luck, boy."

Click.

Fletcher went out to the kitchen, found a bottle of rye, and sucked thirstily. He leaned against the sink and ran his palm slowly along cool green tile. It was solid and familiar. That made it worse, somehow. In an earthquake you expect the unusual. But not when the ground is solid under foot.

President Browning-!

Fifteen grand profit on Transsteel-!

Where was Korys-and when?

When Fletcher got to the office, he was somewhat tight and he hadn't wanted to use the hangover cure. Alcohol made a buffer. He played with layouts, but achieved little. Time slipped by unnoticed. Eventually Cynthia Dale appeared, fitting on a small, foolish hat and looking surprised.

"You're a hound for work, Jerry," she said. "Aren't you going home?"

"I can't," Fletcher said. "I felked the sorkins."

"Try mixing them with soda," Cynthia suggested.

He put his hands flat on the desk and stared owlshly up at her. "There isn't any. I've a bottle in the drawer here ... have a drink?"

"Not straight."

"Then marry me. We can go and visit Embryo Fletcher every Sunday."

"You need something," Cynthia said, firmly removing Fletcher from his chair, locating a hat, and lugging him to the elevator. "You need something strong and violent. You can take your choice between a drink and a Turkish bath. If you choose the latter, you'll be deprived of my company."

"You see," Fletcher said carefully, his mouth cold and stiff, "Dr. Sawtelle blew himself up. All his family, too. Quite dead. I've got the equation in my pocket. I am also a murderer."

He elaborated on this subject over a heavy slug of rye. The bartender, an experienced man, had mixed the drink with a licorice stick, so presently Fletcher became more coherent. Cynthia swam out of her fuzzy haze and became her usual charming, cool-eyed self.

"So I called the telephone company again today," Fletcher explained. "There's nothing wrong. Nothing they can find out, anyhow."

"So it's a gag."

"Dr. Sawtelle wouldn't agree, if he could be reassembled. Look." Fletcher lit a cigarette and used the match to destroy a scrap of paper. "There goes the equation. I'm afraid to keep it now. The Voice mentioned that it was dangerous without a control, but he didn't say what the control was."

"He?"

"Sure. A tiny man with a head as big as a watermelon. He lives in the future. I got it all figured out. He's a university professor and he sends his students back into time on field trips."

"With a field telephone, I suppose."

"No, an ordinary phone. They have to keep it quiet. They've a way of tapping the wires-It's logical, isn't it? A telephone call is strictly personal, on a one-party line. But the creeps shifted. Somehow the wires got crossed. I can listen in on part of the conversation now. The Voice's part. But I can't hear Korys."

"You're drunk. I don't believe a word of it." But Cynthia's eyes were troubled.

"Korys," Fletcher went on, "is living in a time when a guy named Browning is running for President. And he'll be elected, too. That's why the Transsteel business didn't work with me. Korys is in the future. I don't know when. 1960 or 1970 or maybe later. Do you know a politician named Browning?"

"I know a poet named Browning," Cynthia said, "but he's in the past."

"Yes. He painted duchesses-What should I do?"

"Have your phone number changed."

"It might-Look, Cynthia, I'm afraid to do anything and I'm afraid not to do anything. I've got a direct line on the future. It's never happened before. It's an opportunity it says here. I ought to be able to clean up a million bucks or write a book or something.

"Patent that hangover cure of yours."

"But its limited. I can't ask questions. I can just listen in on what the Voice says. I can't trace down Korys because he's in the future, too. If I were

sober, I wouldn't be this logical; my skepticism would be too strong. But why shouldn't I believe in Korys and the Voice when I can see the wallpaper crawling up to the ceiling, right across there."

"That's subjective," Cynthia pointed out.

"But what should I do?"

The girl played with her glass. "If I believed you-which I don't-I'd say the lines of logic point to certain possibilities. As a copy-writer I know the rules of dramatic inevitability. Perhaps the Voice will learn you're listening in, and animate the telephone so it crawls down your throat and strangles you."

"Uh!" Fletcher said.

"Or he may send Korys back to kill you-or Embryo Korys."

"I haven't done anything."

"Well," Cynthia said, "here's another angle. In 1960 the Voice telephones you, and your name is Korys."

"I hate paradoxes," Fletcher said firmly. "This isn't a story. I wish it were. I'd know what to do then. But in life you just fumble around, you're not sure. I'm not equipped to listen in on phone calls from the future."

Cynthia's eyes were glowing. "Or you may be Korys yourself-with amnesia! And the Voice is really talking to you, though you don't know it."

"Be quiet. Stop that. There'll be another call tomorrow morning-"

"Don't answer it."

"Ha!" Fletcher said scornfully, and there was a small silence.

"You see," he went on presently, "I figure we take the future for granted, in an abstract sort of way. We expect there'll be super-stuff, but we know it'll come gradually. When it impinges concretely, we don't want it."

"Afraid?"

"Thoroughly afraid," Fletcher agreed. "The temptation's too great. I might copy some equation, try it out, and turn into a blob of protoplasm. There are too many unknown factors. And I'm not going to get myself hurt."

"So?"

"I'm going to keep my nose clean, that's all. Fairy gold!" He grinned crookedly. "I know what it would turn to. But I've got the answer. I'm not going to take anything they offer. I'm not going to cheat. All I'll do is listen in. No harm in that."

"They might mention your death."

"I know I'm going to die sometime. I'm ready. Death and taxes aren't both certain; the existence of one precludes the existence of the other-pro tem.

As long as I just listen-as long as I don't try to conquer the world or build death rays-I'm O.K."

"It reminds me of the old story about the guy who took a short cut through a haunted forest on Hallowe'en," Cynthia said. "He was thinking that he'd always been on the level, and if devils could get him just because he was in the forest, there just wasn't any justice."

"And?"

"And then a voice behind him said, 'there isn't,'" Cynthia said pleasantly. "That's all."

"I run no risks," Fletcher declared.

"And I haven't believed a word you've been saying. But it's a new line, anyhow. Pay for the drinks and let's go somewhere and eat."

Fletcher reached for his wallet.

Quite safe. He hadn't copied any of the instructions or equations the Voice dictated to Korys. Somewhere, in the misty abyss of the future, the Voice lived in his unimaginable world, checking his temporal maps as men today check spatial charts. There were test-tube babies and a rather incredible university and a Polar Weather Station. And Daki had been rescued from the Inquisition, by means of something the Voice referred to casually as a yofleec. "Yofleec is ceelfoy spelled backwards," Fletcher reflected. "Animal, vegetable, or mineral? I don't care!"

His interest became purely impersonal; he had forced it into those channels. It was a tremendous relief to know that he wouldn't be tempted to steal from the future, as the unhappy Dr. Sawtelle had tried to do. There had been some hesitation about the hangover cure; it seemed harmless enough, but Fletcher wasn't sure about its possible toxic effects on a man of his era. It might eventually ossify him. He destroyed the recipe and refused to remember the ingredients.

Meanwhile, he followed the career of Korys with interest. These distorted glimpses into the future were fascinating. Remembering Cynthia's warning, he half expected the Voice to mention that a guy named Jerry Fletcher had been run down by a helicopter, but that never happened. The rules of inevitability didn't apply.

Why should they? He wasn't interfering. He wasn't sticking his neck out. He was following paths of cold logic; a spectator at a play was seldom shot by one of the actors.

John Wilkes Booth-

This wasn't a play. It was a movie. The actors were removed by temporal distances. Nevertheless he never interrupted the Voice now, and was careful to lift and replace the receiver very gently.

It went on for a month. Finally he learned that Korys was preparing to return to his original time-sector. The field work was almost completed. President Browning had been elected; the Dodgers had won the pennant; a

lunar rocket base had been established. Fletcher wondered. 1960? 1970? Or later?

Cynthia steadily refused to visit his apartment and listen to the Voice. She contended that it was just a line. "It's better than etchings," she admitted, but it's a little too outré to be convincing." But Fletcher thought that Cynthia was less skeptical than she admitted.

He didn't care. The affair would end soon, anyhow. His work at the office had not suffered; there was a raise and a promotion in sight, and his hypochondria had lapsed into a passive state. Occasionally he suspected his feeling of well-being and ate vitamin pills as a preventive measure, but not often.

He hadn't even taken notes of the Voice's words. In a way, it was a taboo-the same principle as avoiding stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk, so it won't rain.

"He should be leaving tomorrow," Fletcher told Cynthia one night at dinner.

"Who?"

"Korys, of course."

"Good. Then you may stop talking about him. Unless you get a new bee in your bonnet. What do you expect next? A tame leprechaun?"

Fletcher grinned. "I can't afford it."

"They eat cream, don't they? I mean drink it."

"Mine won't. He'll drink rye and like it."

"I like this chicken cacciatore," Cynthia said, masticating. "If you promise to feed me this well all the time, I may reconsider my refusal to marry you."

It was the most hopeful sign she had shown so far. Fletcher became immersed in daydreams. Later, on a roof garden, they paused between dances to stand at the parapet and look out over the great, glittering city. The immensity of the night was made larger by the lights below.

"A rocket base on the Moon," Fletcher said softly.

Cool winds brushed his cheek. He put his arm about Cynthia and drew her close. He was very glad, suddenly, that he had not stepped on the cracks in the sidewalk. He had taken no chances. The future-the unknown-was dangerous, because it was the unknown.

And that peril could lie fearfully close. Here, now-two steps could carry him to the top of the parapet and over. Luckily men were conditioned against taking those two steps.

"It's cold," he said. "Let's go in, Cynthia. We don't want pneumonia-especially now."

.....

The telephone rang. Fletcher had awakened with another headache this morning. Probably a hangover. He put down his cigarette in an ashtray and gently lifted the receiver. This might be the last call.

The Voice said, "All ready, Korys?"

Pause.

"Half an hour, then. But what caused the delay?"

Another, longer pause.

"Oh, really? I must make a note of that. But neuroses were common in that time. There was a touch of it in Embryo Korys, you know, but it was ironed out. Incidentally, his mother is on furlough. You'll be able to meet her in a few hours-But about this man. He knew who you were?"

Pause.

"I don't see how he could have known. Or located you. If he was as incoherent as all that, he shouldn't have been outside a sanatorium. What was his name?"

Pause.

"Fletcher. Gerald Fletcher? I'll check, but I'm sure there's no record. He's not one of ours. Too bad. Had he escaped from a sanatorium or ... Oh, I see. Well, he's in safe hands now, I suppose. Yes, a mental sanatorium they called it in those days, your research hasn't covered the medical field-such as it was! Curious that he should have known you. I can't understand-"

Pause.

"Called you by name? Not Korys? Really. How could he possibly have known? This is very interesting indeed. Just when did he first appear?"

Pause.

"Crowded-well, naturally. Riding a horse into the Waldorf-Astoria isn't done every day. But I told you there'd be no trouble; every paid off eccentric election bet in those days-Well, if he actually dragged you off the horse and called you by name-it's very curious. Obviously he was mad, but how he knew-No, it couldn't be ESP, could it? There's no actual evidence that the insane are more sensitive than-What did you find out about him?"

Pause.

"I see. Anxiety neurosis, of course, at the start. Something was bothering him-dread of the future, perhaps; that's common enough in such cases. The doctors said ... oh! Then he had escaped from a sanatorium. That sort of thing was interesting-probably started as nothing but hypochondria-built on some recurrent ailment, headaches or-Anyway, it could increase over a long period into a genuine psychosis. How old a man was he?"

The humming void held only silence. And presently-

"Um-m-m. Typical, I'd say, at that age. Nothing we can do now, though-it's a pity. The man's hopelessly insane. It would be interesting to know what it was that set him off on the wrong track originally. I wonder what a man of that time and that type would worry about enough to drive him off balance? Such things start from a basis of hypochondria often enough, as you've described it, but why was he so sure he was going to become insane? Naturally, if you're convinced you're becoming psychotic and brood over it for years-well! Still, we can discuss the case in more detail personally. Half an hour, then?"

Pause.

"Fine. I'm glad you didn't felk the sorkins, boy!" The Voice laughed jovially. There was a click.

Fletcher watched his hand move forward and drop the receiver into its black cradle.

He felt the walls close in.

The End

(c) 1945, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc.: copyright renewed 1973 by Catherine Reggie. Originally appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*, November 1945; reprinted by permission of the author's Estate and its agents, Don Congdon Ltd.