JOHN MORRESSY

WHEN BERTIE MET MARY

THE TIME TRAVELER--FOR so I must call him--emerged from his laboratory with a small wooden box cradled in his hands. He placed it carefully in the center of the table around which we stood.
The box was about the size of three thick duodecimo volumes set one atop another. He unlatched the lid and carefully lifted out a small metallic object with handlebars and a seat. It looked for all the world like an elegant miniature velocipede made of ivory and crystal and leather, and fine silvery wires, with a little umbrella over the seat. Two tiny levers were centered between the handlebars.
"It's very nicely made," said the Artistic Podiatrist. "Rather elaborate for a toy, though, wouldn't you say?"
"It isn't a toy. It's a time machine," said the Time Traveler.
Wilby snorted, "Nonsense! It has no hands."
"It's not that sort of time machine. It's a vehicle that enables people to travel in time."
"In time for what?" asked the Silly Young Man.
"And what sort of people? No one I know could sit on that thing," the Brusque Bank Manager said, pointing to the little machine. "Why, the seat is no bigger than my thumbnail."
"This is only a working model."
"Let's see it work, then," snapped Wilby.
"That is my intention. Where would you like to send it, into the past or into the future?" asked the Time Traveler.
"The past, of course, and the farther the better," said the Brusque Bank Manager. "I'm a busy man. I don't want to stand around waiting."
"Very well. You must do it yourselves, so there will be no suspicion of trickery. Just push the left-hand lever forward."
We exchanged cautious glances. None of us was eager to be the butt of some obscure joke. Finally the Brusque Bank Manager extended the well-manicured little finger of his right hand and gave the designated lever a gentle push. The tiny machine began to vibrate. Its outline blurred and grew faint, and then it was gone.
Everyone in the room was silent for a moment. Then, as one, we broke into applause. Cries of "Well done!" and "Deuced clever!" filled the air.
The Artistic Podiatrist extended a hand in congratulation. "Neatest trick I've ever seen, old boy," he said. "Beats anything I saw in my thirty years in India. Do tell us how you made it disappear."
"It was no trick. The machine is traveling into the past," the Time Traveler said.
We all paused to nudge one another in the ribs, wink, and snicker. The Time Traveler glared at us and strode to the door that led to his laboratory. There he stopped, turned, and drawing himself up to his full height, which was a shade below average, said, "I see you require proof. Very well, then. Be here next Thursday precisely at six and you shall have your proof."
"That's a bit early for dinner. Are we dressing?" asked the Silly Young Man.
"You are an extremely silly young man," said the Time Traveler. He turned on his heel and vanished into his laboratory.
"I say," exclaimed the Silly Young Man. "I thought that was a perfectly reasonable question."
On the following Thursday we arrived at the Time Traveler's house at six, as directed. Seven o'clock came and went, and seven- thirty, and we began to suspect a hoax. At twelve minutes to ten, as we were passing the whiskey around for the fifth time, spilling a good deal of it and laughing rather loudly at one of Wilby's jokes, the door of the room was flung open.
For a moment, the Time Traveler stood silhouetted in the doorway. His shooting jacket was torn and smeared with mud. One eye was blackened. He staggered into the room and collapsed in a chair. In a

strained voice, he called for brandy.
Wilby mumbled something about "Off on a bit of a toot," and the Silly Young Man said, "I thought we were dressing. I mean, after all, I did ask, and you said --"
I silenced him with a curt gesture and sprang to the Time Traveler's side. Seizing the decanter, I splashed whiskey into a glass and thrust it into his hand. He raised it, sniffed it, and looked at me peevishly.
"I called for brandy."
"Get hold of yourself, old man," I said. "Brandy's for after dinner."
He gripped my forearm and nodded, then emptied the glass in a single gulp. "Thanks. I needed that," he said, rising. "Now just give me time to clean up and change, and we'll have dinner."
"I suppose everything's cold by now," said the Silly Young Man, and at this observation several of the company groaned. This was a complication we had not anticipated.
As if he had not noticed, the Time Traveler went on, "After dinner, you shall have your proof. And then I'll be leaving you."
Dinner was, as the Silly Young Man had predicted, cold. Indeed, it was almost inedible, except for the trifle, which was quite good. We gathered around the fire in the study afterward, our mood peevish and dyspeptic. Ignoring our groans and internal rumblings, the Time Traveler launched into his account. I have set it down here directly as it came from his lips, omitting only the vulgar digestive noises that served as background.
Accounts of the experiments performed by the brilliant eighteenth-century scientist Victor Frankenstein had long fascinated me, and I resolved to use the maiden voyage of my time machine to meet him in person. I knew the period I wished to visit, but was uncertain of the exact location. Eagerness overcoming my customary prudence, I decided to aim for Central Europe and trust to luck.
The machine came to rest in a dense wood. A thick mist obscured all outlines. Wolves howled in the distance, and the eerie patter of dripping moisture was everywhere. I suspected that I had arrived in Transylvania.
As I peered about, seeking my bearings, a faint noise reached my ears. It grew louder, and soon I saw points of light bobbing in the distance, coming ever closer. Suddenly I found myself in the midst of a crowd of peasants. I fell in beside a scowling black- bearded man who repeatedly brandished his torch and cried, "To the castle, men! On to the castle!"
A fat little man just behind us, badly out of breath, panted, "No need to keep shouting, Zoltan. We know where we're going."
Zoltan turned on him with an irate expression. "I'm the leader. I can shout 'To the castle, men' all I want to. The leader always gets to do that."
"Hell of a leader you are," the fat man said in disgust. "We've been stumbling around in these woods for nearly two hours."
Zoltan made a face at him and shouted, "Follow me, men! On to Castle Frankenstein!" at the top of his lungs.
Rejoicing at my good fortune, I stepped forward and tugged at his sleeve. "Excuse me, sir -- may I join your mob ?" I inquired. "I'm heading that way."
The peasants stopped and eyed me suspiciously. Those in the background muttered and made disgusting noises. I later learned that they had been singing a local song of welcome.
At length the fat man, whose name was Imre, said, "Why do you want to storm the castle with us? You're not from the village. Nobody's carried off your children.'
"Has anyone carried off yours?" I asked.
"No," he said with a sigh. "They're still at home. All seventeen of them. A lazy, good-for-nothing bunch of burns with appetites like aristocrats."
"Where are you from, tall stranger?" Zoltan demanded. Only when he had repeated his question three times and hit me on the head did I realize that he was addressing me.
"You must forgive me," I said. "No one has ever addressed me as 'tall stranger' before."
"I was just giving you a little bit of leader-type talk," Zoltan said, swaggering a bit.
"A lousy leader and an even lousier judge of height," Imre muttered.

"I appreciate your interest in my origins," I said, launching into the speech of introduction that I had carefully prepared. "I have come a long way, from far beyond the mountains and across strange seas --"
"Do you know my cousin Stas from Pittsburgh?" an old man broke in.
"Not to speak of," I replied.
"Then do not speak of him!" the old man said, and spat on my shoes.
"Come on, men. On to the castle," Zoltan said, but it was more a half-hearted suggestion than a command. He was rapidly losing enthusiasm and so were his followers. The mob looked at one another, then at him. Some shook their heads. Others snickered. The rest scratched themselves.
"What is your name, stranger?" someone asked me. "Are you from America?" cried another, and a third asked, "Do you know the great Larry Talbot?"
"He does not even know my cousin Stas from Pittsburgh," said the old man, though no one had asked him.
"Enough empty chatter!" Zoltan shouted. "There will be time to talk of home and family when our work is done. On to the castle!"
They moved off, grumbling. The way to Castle Frankenstein was steep and difficult, and the fog was as dense as the peasants. All about me I heard the picturesque obscenities of the region as the men banged into trees, tripped over headstones, or plunged into the small one-man bogs common in that corner of Europe.
I heard a loud splash and a burst of vulgar language close at my side. A man rose from a puddle of muck and cried, "I thought you knew the way to the castle, Zoltan! That's why we made you leader."
"I took the short cut. I thought everybody would like to get there, smash up the laboratory, get the fire going, and be home in time for the soccer match. It starts at eight."
"What time is it now?" the man inquired.
Zoltan consulted his watch and said, "Nine-forty-two." They all shrugged, displaying that charming insouciance so common among peasants the world over.
When the castle loomed into view around a turn in the path, all progress stopped so abruptly that those in the rear fell over the leaders. They scrambled to their feet in some embarrassment and all began to mill about uncertainly. To rally them, I struck up a spirited whistling rendition of "Colonel Bogey's March" and stepped forward smartly, arms swinging. I had gone a quarter of a mile before I realized that I was marching alone.
Looking back, I saw that the mob had disbanded. Small bonfires were being lit. The reedy twang of a harmonica wrung the cool mountain air. A breeze carried the sound of soft humming to where I stood.
"What is going on here?" I shouted through cupped hands.
"It is our break," came the faint answer.
"How long will it last?"
"Who knows? We are simple people, easily distracted. You must not let us hold you back. Feel free to go on ahead and do brave things."
I shouted a venomous farewell and proceeded up the mountain alone. The way was steep but free of all impediments, and I soon found myself before the great oaken doors of Castle Frankenstein.
The doors swung open at my touch. No one was in sight within. Following the soft sound of a distant zither, I made my way up a winding flight of stone steps, knocked gently at the door of the room from which the sound was coming, and entered. A gaunt, stern-faced man looked up from his zither, regarded me with interest, adjusted his glasses, removed and polished them, replaced them on his nose, observed me further with the dispassionate eye of the scientist, and after a full minute of silent study said in a disdainful voice, "Are you a simpleton?"
"Certainly not," I said with a show of dignity. "Are you?"
"I am Doctor Frankenstein!" he cried, rising and laying aside his zither. "What are you doing here if you are not a simpleton?"
"I could learn," I said, hoping to mollify him.
"There is no time." He calmed a bit, but was obviously impatient. "These people at the classified desk are impossible. I distinctly specified a simpleton. Here, see for yourself."

He thrust into my hand a ragged scrap of paper. Though it was in an unfamiliar language, by observing its unpunctuated abbreviations and compacted syntax I was able to deduce that it had been torn from the classified advertisement section of a newspaper. I studied it closely and said, "For all I can tell, it may be a decent position. But I am not here to discuss career opportunities. I've come to warn you. The townspeople are aroused. They're marching on the castle with torches. They are an ugly mob."
He stepped to the window and studied the encampment through a telescope. "An ugly mob indeed. Look at that one with the hairy nostrils. The one next to him is no prize, either," he said, passing me the telescope. I was compelled to agree with his assessment.
"What are you going to do, Doctor Frankenstein?"
He took up his zither and strummed thoughtfully. "For one thing, there will be no more house calls. Oh, it's 'God bless you, Doctor Frankenstein,' and 'You are a living saint, Doctor Frankenstein,' when their daughter needs a distemper shot or the son has a stake in his heart. But let one of my creations get loose and eat a family or two and it's 'To the castle, men!' It's become a local tradition. In warm weather, they're up here almost every week. I have a full night's work to put out the fires and pass out cider and doughnuts and get everyone off the grounds, and days before everything is tidied up. And they're always late paying their bills."
"Why do you work in this drafty old castle, anyway? Wouldn't a nice, modern laboratory be more suitable?"
With a sly wink, he said, "I bought this place as an investment. A lot of mad scientists and young married couples are buying castles in the neighborhood. You modernize the plumbing, make the oubliette into a guest room, and you can double your money in three years."
"That may be so, but it hardly seems right that the great Victor Frankenstein should have to --"
"Victor? You want Victor Frankenstein?" he broke in.
"Yes. Aren't you...?"
He slapped his thigh, gave a hearty laugh, and pointed at me derisively. "Boy, are you lost! You want the Geneva Frankensteins. Old Vic the Stitch and his family -- the ones who make monsters, right?"
"Then you're not the Doctor Frankenstein who makes monsters out of old odds and ends of corpses?" I asked, crestfallen.
"I'm Eddie Frankenstein. Want to see my card?"
When I expressed my desire to do so, he drew a small card from his waistcoat pocket. On it was the unmistakable legend, "Eddie Frankenstein, The Transylvanian Nightingale."
"And you don't make monsters?"
His lips curled in scorn. "I wouldn't touch that line of work with a ten-foot pole. Vic only got into it to clean his place up."
Observing my perplexity, he explained, "Vic's a surgeon. Does a lot of amputations. That's the big thing in Geneva these days, amputations. The bits and pieces were piling up, and he hated to throw them out--he's always been a saver -- so he started stitching the leftovers together into recycled people. It's tough to put together a good one, though. He gets plenty of arms and legs, but very few heads. Can't do much without heads."
"So Victor Frankenstein has never succeeded in creating a living monster?"
"Well, he puts them together, but he's not good at needlework and he can't seem to find a reliable power source. They never make it off the operating table. But he's persistent. I'll give him that."
"And what branch of science do you pursue, Doctor Eddie?"
"Science is only a sideline with me. I prefer to think of myself as a singer. But I dabble in carnivorous blobs of protoplasm. I've had some success, if I say so myself."
"It seems to make you unpopular with the neighbors," I observed.
Doctor Frankenstein laughed. "Tonight is nothing. You should have seen them when a big one got loose and ate the local brewery. What a weekend that was!" he reminisced. "First the peasants, with their torches and shouting and knocking everything over, and when I finally got rid of them...have you ever tried to calm down a seven-ton blob of drunken protoplasm ?"
"Actually, no. But once, when I was an undergraduate at Oxford --" I began.

He silenced me with a brusque gesture. "Not the same thing. Too bad. Not only are you not a simpleton, you're inexperienced."
I tried to direct the conversation away from my shortcomings. "Have you ever thought of relocating?"
"Funny you should mention that.... I think of it about twice a week, but every time I'm set to go, I remember how it used to be and get all nostalgic. In the old days, the peasants and I got along beautifully. They were simple people, content to work hard all week, dawn to dark, and amuse themselves with Schuhplattler and yodeling on Sundays and an annual blast every October at the Burpenfeste. That was before Rex ate the brewery.' He sighed and gazed wistfully out the window. "Life was good in those days."
"It doesn't sound like much," I said.
"That shows what you know about schuhplattler and yodeling," Doctor Frankenstein said with acerbity. "But it wasn't all we did. I used to give organ concerts on the first Tuesday of every month, laughing maniacally as I played. They loved it. But when my voice gave out, they lost interest. Not much for musical appreciation, these people, but they love maniacal laughter." He studied me thoughtfully. "Look, you haven't got much to offer, but if you can do maniacal laughter, I'll take you on a trial basis."
"I'm afraid I can't help," I confessed.
He threw up his hands in disgust. "I can't find a worthwhile assistant. That's how all the trouble began, with my assistants. Fritz was just a clown, but Igor upset the peasants with his practical jokes. Finally they played one on him. They nailed him in a crate full of rocks and threw him in the river."
"You must find a better class of assistant."
"Yes, but I insist on a nice clean simpleton this time. I've had it up to here with idiots and lunatics. I have a woman who comes in once a week to do the dusting, but she's useless as an assistant. She always wants to give seconds on the intravenous. Why, one time I even caught her--"
"Doctor, there's no time for idle chat!" I broke in. "The mob will he here soon. You must think of a way to escape and put this behind you."
"It's all taken care of Carnivorous blobs of protoplasm don't take up all my time." He struck a heroic pose: jaw firmly set, eyes uplifted, arms thrust upward and outward. "I have built a spaceship, a gleaming silver shaft of power to lift me to the stars! Come have a look."
He led me to the dungeon. In a large chamber on the far side of the root cellar stood his creation. Huge rockets pointed toward the high vaulted ceiling, while the nose of the craft was aimed at the stone floor. I sensed at once that something was amiss.
"It's pointing the wrong way," I said.
"The wrong way?"
"Down. It should point up," I said, indicating the proper direction by a common digital gesture:
"But then everyone would see. The whole idea is to slip away unnoticed."
"It makes for a rough start."
"I'll chance it. If anything goes wrong, I don't want a bunch of peasants saying, 'I told you so.' I couldn't stand that."
"I don't think that will be a problem."
At that moment, a strange sound reached my ears. It reminded me of bubbles bursting in a vat of molasses, or wet laundry being flung into mashed potatoes. Doctor Frankenstein affected not to hear. The sound came again, louder.
"That noise, Doctor -- what can it be!" I cried in alarm.
He put his arm around my shoulder. "Nothing to worry about, buddy. Look, you'll never make it as a simpleton, but what the heck, I like you. You're hired."
The noise grew louder. It seemed closer than before. "Shouldn't we discuss salary?" I asked.
"Trust me, I'm a doctor. You can start right away. Now. This minute."
"What are my duties?"
"You feed Rover," Doctor Frankenstein said, backing toward the spaceship. "Throw him three hogs every other day, and see that there's always water in his dish. He takes ninety gallons. Make sure it's at room temperature, or he'll get peevish."

By now, the slurpy burbling sound from behind the heavy doors at the far end of the dungeon was quite loud. Added to it was a noise from above: the rhythmic pounding of wood against wood, like the thunder of a battering ram. I grew fearful for my safety, and looked about for a way of escape.

While I was thus distracted, Doctor Frankenstein slipped into his rocketship and sealed the port behind him. The roar of rockets drowned out all other sound. I saw the far doors bulge inward, and a thin stream of protoplasm began to flow across the dungeon floor toward me. At that very moment, the upper door shattered and men burst onto the landing at the head of the long staircase, waving torches and making unsympathetic gestures in my direction as they shouted, "There's his assistant! Seize him!" As their feet were on the first step, the spaceship, with a mighty blast of power, achieved liftdown.

Of my escape from the rubble of Castle Frankenstein, my headlong flight through the dark, dank Transylvanian woods, and my desperate search for the time machine, I remember little. When at last I found the machine, I flung myself onto the seat, threw the lever with my last strength, and returned to this time and place.

And now, gentlemen, as I am exhausted, I must beg you to excuse me. If you wish to examine the time machine, it is in my laboratory. The door is open. Good-night to you," said the Time Traveler, and without another word, he left us.

"I'm hanged if it isn't late," said Wilby. "How shall we get a cab?"

"Get a cab if you like. I want to see the Time Machine," I said.

"Don't tell me you believe all that infernal nonsense about rocket ships and carnivorous blobs of protoplasm," said the Brusque Bank Manager.

Wilby added, "He told us we'd have proof tonight. Well, I haven't seen any proof. Heard a deuced fine yarn, but didn't see a shred of proof."

Ignoring their jibes, I entered the Time Traveler's laboratory. In the center of the floor stood a contraption singularly resembling the tiny object he had shown us the week previous. This one, however, was full-sized and easily capable of carrying a passenger.

My interest aroused, I studied the machine more closely. Two facts were immediately evident: it was not a commonplace velocipede, as it first appeared to be, and it had seen recent hard outdoor use. The bottom portions were thickly encrusted with dark smelly mud of a kind found only in certain backward regions of Transylvania, and snagged on one of the handlebars was a tiny tuft of fur which I recognized at once as coming from the pelt of a werewolf.

On the floor beside the machine lay a ragged scrap roughly torn from a newspaper. I picked it up and studied it. When I had satisfied myself concerning its provenance, I placed it carefully in my note-case and returned to the study to present my findings to the others.

By the time I returned, they had all left. I sat in the chair by the fire, lit a cigar, and drew out the newspaper item. With the help of a dictionary from my host's extensive library, I worked out a full and exact translation:

simpltn: loyal; strong; clean; sm knowledge sci; good w carniv blbs protoplasm and angry psnts; to act as asst to ecc sci gent. Nite wk, no trav req. Challenging pos. Gd med plan, many addl bfts. Fee pd. Reply Bx 88, The Transylvania Shopper News.

Reading and rereading this curious notice, I must have dozed, for I awoke with a start at the sound of footsteps. I rubbed my eyes and glanced up in time to see a figure vanish into the laboratory. It was the Time Traveler, and he carried three books under his arm.

I yawned and stretched, and rose slowly to bid him good night. But at the sound of my movement, he raced to the door of his laboratory and slammed it shut. I followed, and as I struggled to force it open, a strange humming noise rose inside the laboratory, grew louder, and then stopped abruptly.

I redoubled my efforts at the door. When at last I forced it open, the room was empty. The machine that had stood in the center was gone, and the Time Traveler was nowhere to be seen.

These events took place five years ago next Thursday. Neither man nor machine has been seen since that night, and no explanation for the Time Traveler's disappearance has ever been forthcoming. I alone, of all men, know the answer to the enigma.

But one mystery remains unsolved. I was familiar with his library, and a careful check of the shelves

enabled me to identify two of the three volumes he had chosen to take with him on his journey: Miss Lambert's excellent Hand-book of Needlework and Nollet's account, in the Memoires of the French Academy, of his investigation into the force of electricity, along with unpublished reports on the same phenomenon, which the Time Traveler had had bound together.

Of the third volume I am uncertain. It might have been Colonel Ponsonby's thrilling Headhunting in the South Pacific or Baedeker's Guide to Geneva. Glooffinger's Principles of Bookbinding (1898 edition, revised and illustrated, with the introduction by Sklitts- Foosbacker, foreword by Hornby, preface by McGlibb, and the embarrassing typographical error on page 763) is another possibility. Or was it Loudbottom's Complete Rhyming Dictionary? The title remains a mystery.

What purpose lay behind the Time Traveler's selection, it is impossible to say. I fear the worst. And only time will tell.