

Dark Interlude

Fredric Brown and Mack Reynolds

Sheriff Ben Rand's eyes were grave. He said, "Okay, boy. You feel kind of jittery; that's natural. But if your story's straight, don't worry. Don't worry about nothing. Everything'll be all right, boy."

"It was three hours ago, Sheriff," Allenby said. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get into town and that I had to wake you up. But Sis was hysterical a while. I had to try and quiet her down, and then I had trouble starting the jalopy."

"Don't worry about waking me up, boy. Being sheriff's a full-time job. And it ain't late, anyway; I just happened to turn in early tonight. Now let me get a few things straight. You say your name's Lou Allenby. That's a good name in these parts, Allenby. You kin of Rance Allenby, used to run the feed business over in Cooperville? I went to school with Rance . . . Now about the fella who said he come from the future . . ."

The Presider of the Historical Research Department was skeptical to the last. He argued, "I am still of the opinion that the project is not feasible. There are paradoxes involved which present insurmountable—"

Doctor Matthe, the noted physicist, interrupted politely, "Undoubtedly, sir, you are familiar with the Dichotomy?"

The presidor wasn't, so he remained silent to indicate that he wanted an explanation.

"Zeno propounded the Dichotomy. He was a Greek philosopher of roughly five hundred years before the ancient prophet whose birth was used by the primitives to mark the beginning of their calendar. The Dichotomy states that it is impossible to cover any given distance. The argument: First, half the distance must be traversed, then half of the remaining distance, then again half of what remains, and so on. It follows that some portion of the distance to be covered always remains, and therefore motion is impossible."

"Not analogous," the presidor objected. "In the first place, your Greek assumed that any totality composed of an infinite number of parts must, itself, be infinite, whereas we know that an infinite number of elements make up a finite total. Besides—"

Matthe smiled gently and held up a hand. "Please, sir, don't misunderstand me. I do not deny that today we understand Zeno's paradox. But believe me, for long centuries the best minds the human race could produce could not explain it."

The presidor said tactfully, "I fail to see your point, Doctor Matthe. Please forgive my inadequacy. What possible connection has this Dichotomy of Zeno's with your projected expedition into the past?"

"I was merely drawing a parallel, sir. Zeno conceived the paradox proving that it was impossible to cover any distance, nor were the ancients able to explain it. But did that prevent them from covering distances? Obviously not. Today, my assistants and I have devised a method to send our young friend here, Jan Obreen, into the distant past. The paradox is immediately pointed out—suppose he should kill an ancestor or otherwise change history? I do not claim to be able to explain how

this apparent paradox is overcome in time travel; all I know is that time travel is possible. Undoubtedly, better minds than mine will one day resolve the paradox, but until then we shall continue to utilize time travel, paradox or not."

Jan Obreen had been sitting, nervously quiet, listening to his distinguished superiors. Now he cleared his throat and said, "I believe the hour has arrived for the experiment."

The presidor shrugged his continued disapproval, but dropped the conversation. He let his eyes scan doubtfully the equipment that stood in the corner of the laboratory.

Matthe shot a quick glance at the time piece, then hurried last minute instructions to his student.

"We've been all over this before, Jan, but to sum it up—You should appear approximately in the middle of the so-called Twentieth Century; exactly where, we don't know. The language will be Amer-English, which you have studied thoroughly; on that count you should have little difficulty. You will appear in the United States of North America, one of the ancient nations—as they were called—a political division of whose purpose we are not quite sure. One of the designs of your expedition will be to determine why the human race at that time split itself into scores of states, rather than having but one government.

"You will have to adapt yourself to the conditions you find, Jan. Our histories are so vague that we can help you but little in information on what to expect."

The presidor put in, "I am extremely pessimistic about this, Obreen, yet you have volunteered and I have no right to interfere. Your most important task is to leave a message that will come down to us; if you are successful, other attempts will be made to still other periods in history. If you fail--"

"He won't fail," Matthe said.

The presidor shook his head and grasped Obreen's hand in farewell.

Jan Obreen stepped to the equipment and mounted the small platform. He clutched the metal grips on the instrument panel somewhat desperately, hiding to the best of his ability the shrinking inside himself.

The sheriff said, "Well, this fella—you say he told you he came from the future?"

Lou Allenby nodded. "About four thousand years ahead. He said it was the year thirty-two hundred and something, but that it was about four thousand years from now; they'd changed the numbering system meanwhile."

"And you didn't figure it was hogwash, boy? From the way you talked, I got the idea that you kind of believed him."

The other wet his lips. "I kind of believed him," he said doggedly. "There was something about him; he was different. I don't mean physically, that he couldn't pass for being horn now, but there was . . . something different. Kind of, well, like he was at peace with himself; gave the impression that where he came from everybody was. And he was smart, smart as a whip. And he wasn't crazy, either."

"And what was he doing back here, boy?" The sheriff's voice was gently caustic.

"He was—some kind of student. Seems from what he said that almost everybody in his time was a student. They'd solved all the problems of production and distribution, nobody had to worry about security; in fact, they didn't seem to worry

about any of the things we do now." There was a trace of wistfulness in Lou Allenby's voice. He took a deep breath and went on. "He'd come back to do research in our time. They didn't know much about it, it seems. Something had happened in between —there was a bad period of several hundred years—and most books and records had been lost. They had a few, but not many. So they didn't know much about us and they wanted to fill in what they didn't know."

"You believed all that, boy? Did he have any proof?"

It was the dangerous point; this was where the prime risk lay. They had had, for all practical purposes, no knowledge of the exact contours of the land, forty centuries back, nor knowledge of the presence of trees or buildings. If he appeared at the wrong spot, it might well mean instant death.

Jan Obreen was fortunate; he didn't hit anything. It was, in fact, the other way around. He came out ten feet in the air over a plowed field. The fall was nasty enough, but the soft earth protected him; one ankle seemed sprained, but not too badly. He came painfully to his feet and looked around.

The presence of the field alone was sufficient to tell him that the Matthe process was at least partially successful. He was far before his own age. Agriculture was still a necessary component of human economy, indicating a definitely earlier civilization than his own.

Approximately half a mile away was a densely wooded area; not a park, nor even a planned forest to house the controlled wild life of his time. A haphazardly growing wooded area—almost unbelievable. But, then, he must grow used to the unbelievable; of all the historic periods, this was the least known. Much would be strange.

To his right, a few hundred yards away, was a wooden building. It was, undoubtedly, a human dwelling despite its primitive appearance. There was no use putting it off; contact with his fellow man would have to be made. He limped awkwardly toward his meeting with the Twentieth Century.

The girl had evidently not observed his precipitate arrival, but by the time he arrived in the yard of the farm house, she had come to the door to greet him.

Her dress was of another age, for in his era the clothing of the feminine portion of the race was not designed to lure the male. Hers, however, was bright and tasteful with color, and it emphasized the youthful contours of her body. Nor was it her dress alone that startled him. There was a touch of color on her lips that he suddenly realized couldn't have been achieved by nature. He had read that primitive women used colors, paints and pigments of various sorts, upon their faces—somehow or other, now that he witnessed it, he was not repelled.

She smiled, the red of her mouth stressing the even whiteness of her teeth. She said, "It would've been easier to come down the road 'stead of across the field." Her eyes took him in, and, had he been more experienced, he could have read interested approval in them.

He said, studiously, "I am afraid that I am not familiar with your agricultural methods. I trust I have not irrevocably damaged the products of your horticultural efforts."

Susan Allenby blinked at him. "My," she said softly, a distant hint of laughter in

her voice, "somebody sounds like maybe they swallowed a dictionary." Her eyes widened suddenly, as she noticed him favoring his left foot. "Why, you've hurt yourself. Now you come right on into the house and let me see if I can't do something about that. Why—"

He followed her quietly, only half hearing her words. Something—something phenomenal—was growing within Jan Obreen, affecting oddly and yet pleasantly his metabolism.

He knew now what Matthe and the presidor meant by paradox.

The sheriff said, "Well, you were away when he got to your place—however he got there?"

Lou Allenby nodded. "Yes, that was ten days ago. I was in Miami taking a couple of weeks' vacation. Sis and I each get away for a week or two every year, but we go at different times, partly because we figure it's a good idea to get away from one another once in a while anyway."

"Sure, good idea, boy. But your Sis, she believed this story of where he came from?"

"Yes. And, Sheriff, she had proof. I wish I'd seen it too. The field he landed in was fresh plowed. After she'd fixed his ankle she was curious enough, after what he'd told her, to follow his footsteps through the dirt hack to where they'd started. And they ended, or, rather, started, right smack in the middle of a field, with a deep mark like he'd fallen there."

"Maybe he came from an airplane, in a parachute, boy. Did you think of that?"

"I thought of that, and so did Sis. She says that if he did he must've swallowed the parachute. She could follow his steps every bit of the way—it was only a few hundred yards—and there wasn't any place he could've hidden or burned a parachute."

The sheriff said, "They got married right away, you say?"

"Two days later. I had the car with me, so Sis hitched the team and drove them into town—he didn't know how to drive horses—and they got married."

"See the license, boy? You sure they was really—"

Lou Allenby looked at him, his lips beginning to go white, and the sheriff said hastily, "All right, boy, I didn't mean it that way. Take it easy, boy."

Susan had sent her brother a telegram telling him all about it, but he'd changed hotels and somehow the telegram hadn't been forwarded. The first he knew of the marriage was when he drove up to the farm almost a week later.

He was surprised, naturally, but John O'Brien—Susan had altered the name somewhat—seemed likable enough. Handsome, too, if a bit strange, and he and Susan seemed head over heels in love.

Of course, he didn't have any money, *they* didn't use it in his day, he had told them, but he was a good worker, not at all soft. There was no reason to suppose that he wouldn't make out all right.

The three of them planned, tentatively, for Susan and John to stay at the farm until John had learned the ropes somewhat. Then he expected to be able to find some manner in which to make money—he was quite optimistic about his ability in that

line—and spending his time traveling, taking Susan with him. Obviously, he'd be able to learn about the present that way.

The important thing, the all-embracing thing, was to plan some message to get to Doctor Matthe and the presidor. If this type of research was to continue, all depended upon him.

He explained to Susan and Lou that it was a one-way trip. That the equipment worked only in one direction, that there was travel to the past, but not to the future. He was a voluntary exile, fated to spend the rest of his life in this era. The idea was that when he'd been in this century long enough to describe it well, he'd write up his report and put it in a box he'd have especially made to last forty centuries and bury it where it could be dug up—in a spot that had been determined in the future. He had the exact place geographically.

He was quite excited when they told him about the time capsules that had been buried elsewhere. He knew that they had never been dug up and planned to make it part of his report so the men of the future could find them.

They spent their evenings in long conversations, Jan telling of his age and what he knew of all the long centuries in between. Of the long fight upward and man's conquests in the fields of science, medicine and in human relations. And they telling him of theirs, describing the institutions, the ways of life which he found so unique.

Lou hadn't been particularly happy about the precipitate marriage at first, but he found himself warming to Jan. Until ...

The sheriff said, "And he didn't tell you what he was till this evening?"

"That's right."

"Your sister heard him say it? She'll back you up?"

"I . . . I guess she will. She's upset now, like I said, kind of hysterical. Screams that she's going to leave me and the farm. But she heard him say it, Sheriff. He must of had a strong hold on her, or she wouldn't be acting the way she is."

"Not that I doubt your word, boy, about a thing like that, but it'd be better if she heard it too. How'd it come up?"

"I got to asking him some questions about things in his time and after a while I asked him how they got along on race problems and he acted puzzled and then he said he remem-bered something about races from history he'd studied, but that there weren't any races then.

"He said that by his time—starting after the war of some-thing-or-other, I forget its name—all the races had blended into one. That the whites and the yellows had mostly killed one another off and that Africa had dominated the world for a while, and then all the races had begun to blend into one by colonization and intermarriage and that by his time the pro-cess was complete. I just stared at him and asked him, 'You mean you got nigger blood in you?' and he said, just like it didn't mean anything, 'At least one-fourth.' "

"Well, boy, you did just what you had to," the sheriff told him earnestly, "no doubt about it."

"I just saw red. He'd married Sis; he was sleeping with her. I was so crazy-mad I don't even remember getting my gun." "Well, don't worry about it, boy. You did right."

"But I feel like hell about it. He didn't know."

"Now that's a matter of opinion, boy. Maybe you swallowed a little too much of this hogwash. Coming from the future—huh! These niggers'll think up the damndest tricks to pass themselves off as white. What kind of proof for his story is that mark on the ground? Hogwash, boy, ain't nobody coming from the future or going there neither. We can just quiet this up so it won't never be heard of nowhere. It'll be like it never happened."