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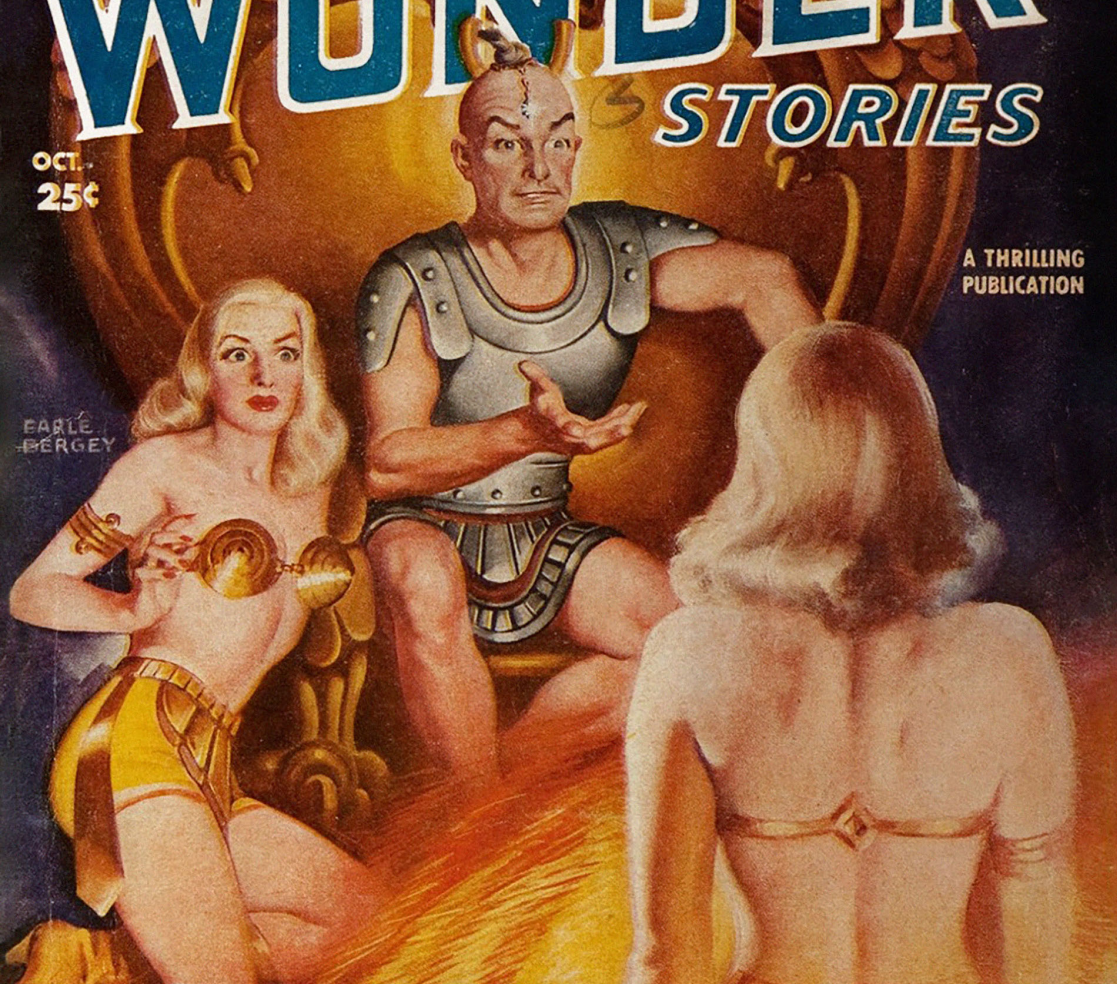
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Date Line

By BENJ. MILLER

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in this etext.]**

In the year 2200 A.D., Solar News Company became the biggest corporation in the nine planets. In the year 2220, Solar built the Heptagon, so called not because it was seven-sided but because it covered seven solid blocks, housed seven hundred thousand employees, and on its seventieth floor had a spacefield big enough to handle a fair-sized interplanetary patrol boat.

In the early part of the Twenty-Third Century, war had been eliminated for so long that international affairs no longer had the deep significance they had had in the Twentieth Century. Controls were so rigid there had not been any startling development in economics or science for over a century, with the single exception of time-travel.

People everywhere on Earth had finally resigned themselves to taking it easy, and so *Solar News* was just about on the rocks when along came time-travel, and Smullen, the sharp-eyed vice-president of Solar, foresaw a chance to put Solar in the clear again.

The Time Travel Section soon became the most important part of the morning telepaper, and by the year 2220 had become about ninety per cent of *Solar News*. Inasmuch as nothing happened in the now, people were fascinated by what had happened in the past, especially when they could read those events told by current eyewitnesses.

By the year 2229, Stieve Andro had become one of Solar's two hundred ace reporters, and by December of that year he was regarded so highly that he was transferred to the block that housed the *Morning Telepaper* division. There he was

sent to the wing that contained the all-important Time Travel Section; they referred him to the sixty-second floor that was occupied by the Early Twentieth Century Department, and finally he was ushered to a suite where he would conduct the “Three Hundred Years Ago Today” feature.

Stieve was very happy. He had the choice run of the Solar System and he was making almost as much as the best-paid truck driver in Manhattan. But by March 13, 2230, Stieve was a very discouraged ace. He sat back in the milkweed-stuffed chair and adjusted his hydraulic desk until his feet were exactly the right height. Then he scowled at Orig Prem.

Secretly Stieve was proud of Orig, who had just recently come from the chromium-platers. Orig was old-fashioned by some standards. He was a 2219 model, and the following year Roborporation had brought out their android models.

“You look good,” said Stieve. “I may be reactionary, but I much prefer you, with your steel plates, to the androids with their synthetic tissue that looks like flesh but isn’t. You may be too tough for me to kick you where you need it most, but at least you don’t fool me into thinking that you feel it. Besides, they haven’t got the bugs out of the androids yet.

“Medlock over in Time-Stream Traffic had one whose psychological relays got mixed up so that he sat all day in the middle of the Thirty-Six Hundred B.C. time channel. Medlock had sneaked out to watch them work on the Pyramid of Cheops (Medlock has his doctor’s degree in Sidewalk engineering, you know) and he was stuck there and

couldn't get back on account of this dummy balking in the time-channel, and by the time Medlock got it out of the Egyptian sun, he was so thirsty he could even drink water."

"I'm glad you like me, sir," said Orig Prem's staccato metallic voice. "I'd not be one to belittle competition, sir, but I think I have a good many useful years left before you junk me. And I do hope, sir, that when that time does come, you will honor my memory by choosing another honest robot."

Stieve licked his lips. "For a robot, you've got a lot of gall—pardon me, I mean a lot of nerve—especially when you've got us in bad with the whole Twentieth Century."

A soft crimson light diffused throughout Orig Prem's chrome-plated face.

"You can well blush," Stieve said severely. "It was bad enough when you crashed the Mayor's inauguration party and got tight as an acetylene tank on the Mayor's punch. Maybe he would even have forgiven you for winning the police chief's pants with your electronic dice, but I'm danged if I can figure any possible defense for your making passes at the Mayor's wife."

Orig allowed the red blush to creep around the back of his steel-plated neck.

"She was very young, sir, and very beautiful, and the Mayor—well, I think the necrology records show that he died of senility the following year."

Stieve brought his feet to the pneumatic floor with what he wished would be a crash. "You dummy!"

"That's only logic, sir," Orig said apologetically.

“It may be logic,” Stieve said sternly, “but it isn’t human, and it’s got us in bad. After all, we must be diplomats. We represent the Twenty-Third Century, Prem.”

Orig frowned. Then he said meekly, “To save my soul—pardon me—to save my thermionic relays I won’t see why you were out in the pantry kissing the Mayor’s wife’s maid. The Mayor’s wife was most indignant over that, sir. She said she didn’t realize she had moss on her—whatever that means—and I was just trying to console her.”

“Well,” Stieve said dreamily, “that maid was a very choice—hey—” He sat up straight. “If I thought you were trying to be insubordinate I’d have your thermopile checked. Anyway,” he said morosely, “it’s a good thing Medlock’s android in charge of Time Traffic last night was a new man, or he wouldn’t have let us come back ahead of schedule. And it’s a good thing the Mayor is working for his degree in Sidewalk Engineering and had to leave just then to watch one of their old-fashioned bulldozers push down a brick building, or we’d be rotting right now in a cold damp cell back in Nineteen-Thirty. And your joints would rust. How would you like that?”

Orig shook his shining head. “Not very well, sir.”

“And now,” Stieve went on, “the chief of police back in Nineteen-Thirty said he’d have six squad cars waiting for us this afternoon. If they get us in the jug, we may spend the rest of our lives there. Those Twentieth Century judges don’t like our Time Travel legal experts. They say it balls up the precedents.”

“What shall we do, sir?” Orig asked respectfully.

Stieve got up and went to the transparent plastic wall. He watched a sky-tractor ease a pre-fabricated floor onto the ninety-story Liberty Tower across the street. Then he turned around.

“I’ll have to see Smullen. Maybe he’ll give me another assignment. I don’t dare tell him the truth about what you’ve done because he’s an android man.”

“I’m genuinely sorry, sir,” said Orig. “Honest, I was only getting things organized for you with the Mayor’s wife, sir. It’s one of my built-in principles, you know, sir, to be helpful. You were present at my conditioning, sir. In fact, you sponsored me. Have you forgotten, sir, the words of the integrator as he connected my brain-cells. ‘A helpful robot is a happy robot?’”

Stieve made a face. “You can sop up the deluge,” he said dryly. “I am well aware that you are the greatest little organizer in *Solar News*. I am also certain that you and I don’t dare go back to the year Nineteen-Thirty until the administration changes or until we can figure out a way to make things right. Well, keep your articulated fingers crossed, I’m going to see Smullen.”

The director of Solar News’s Time Travel Section was tough. “You’ve got the best run in time,” he said harshly. “Early Twentieth Century — first air flight, electronics, atomic power, interplanetary flight — Good grief, man, what do you want?”

“Why not let me skip around and get to something interesting?”

“You know that’s against time-travel regulations. Here’s the book of rules. You ought to know them as well as I do. No two trips will be made to the same point in time without a lapse of at least thirty days—that’s the no-doubling rule; and no zigzagging—that means if you’re going back three hundred years ago every day you can’t skip a day and then go back to it tomorrow. They claim it jams up the time-streams, and if I take you out of Nineteen-Thirty so that you lose a day, then you can’t go back to that day for a month. And not more than one trip a day.”

“Well, I’m in Nineteen-Thirty,” said Stieve, “and nothing has happened since the depression. You can fake the Three Hundred Years Ago Feature for a while. Let me go up to Twenty-Ninety-One and report the Last War. There was something. The world got in such a turmoil they even threw away all the calendars until somebody made out another one in Twenty-One-O-Five, after it was all over.”

“Not dramatic enough. The real war—the war of robot bombs and atomics—was over in three days. They spent the next twenty years fighting a war of attrition, with diseases that killed ninety per cent of the population, and starvation for most of the others because the ground was impregnated with chemicals that killed plants. That twenty years was a terrible time for humanity. It was worse than the Black Ages and it was on a worldwide scale. Man hunted man and lived in caves. But that isn’t dramatic on a big scale.”

“Well,” said Stieve patiently, “how about the Middle Ages? Let me do One Thousand Years Ago Today. Anything,” he said fervently, “to get away from Nineteen-Thirty.”

Smullen stared piercingly at him for a moment, then he said shortly, “Murphy’s on that.”

“Well, Declining Roman—Two Thousand Years Ago Today?”

“LaFond’s on that, and LaFond’s a good man. He’s got Alexander Severus eating out of his hand. The Persians are demanding that the Romans clear out of Asia, and LaFond has his finger on the entire situation. I wouldn’t think of pulling him out.”

“Well, give me something besides the Twentieth Century,” Stieve demanded, “If I have to go back there again, I might be tempted to cause trouble for the Legal Department.”

Smullen drew a deep breath and looked out from under his eyebrows, but Stieve was triumphant, for he knew Smullen’s weak point. Smullen hated inter-time legal tangles.

Smullen reached for the Assignment Book. “You’d better dig up something to interest the Plutonians once in a while,” he growled. “They’re threatening to quit subscribing to the service if we don’t broadcast news of more interest to them.”

“How can anybody find anything they like?” asked Stieve. “They’re practically out of the system.”

The director eyed Stieve for a moment or two before answering.

“They’re not entirely out of it,” Smullen said sharply. “The planet kicks in a billion and a half a year for full telepaper

coverage.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Stieve promised, relenting. He knew what pressure Contacts could put on the service departments. “What can you give me out of the Book?”

“Well, I can send you to Columbus’ discovery of America as a special feature. We haven’t done that for a while.”

“Okay,” Stieve said quickly. He was on his feet. He felt better now. “I’ll get hold of Traffic and see if Medlock can fix it up for me to cover about two weeks ahead of time, maybe, for a little background. Want it all in one issue?”

“Yes,” said Smullen, closing the Book. “This afternoon. With photographs.”

“Okay, boss!” Stieve was very happy now. He went back to the suite. He told Orig Prem, but Orig did not answer at once. Stieve stared at him.

“I’d swear that’s a frown on your beryllium brow,” Stieve said. “What’s fissioning?”

Orig’s steel eyelids blinked. “Well, you see, it’s like this. The way I figure it, there’s a mistake in the calendar somewhere. Leap-year isn’t coming right.”

“Leap-year doesn’t come this year. It’s only in a year divisible by four.”

“But not in years divisible by a hundred,” said Orig, “although it does come in years divisible by four hundred. At any rate, when we were in Nineteen-Thirty yesterday —” Orig swallowed hastily — “I saw a calendar of the future and it said March Twelfth, Twenty-Two-Thirty would be on a Wednesday — but this is Tuesday by our calendar.”

Stieve sat down heavily. “Did they build all that useless information into your poor brain? No wonder you’re not much better than a human.”

“No information is ever useless,” Orig said gently.

“Maybe not, unless it comes out of the date-book of the Mayor’s wife,” Stieve said caustically. “Now, listen.” He straightened. “Go see Medlock and take a run back to Fourteen-Ninety-Two, about the first of October. And don’t make eyes at any Indian chief’s daughter.”

“No, sir,” Orig said humbly, and arose jointedly to his full four feet three inches.

Stieve started down to Engineering to put in a beef about the quality of reproduction of color in his moving scenes. He knew what they’d say, that the time-warp or something distorted the color and they had trouble getting the right kind of screens and so on, and he knew they couldn’t help it, but he just wanted to jack them up on general principles. And, besides, Stieve had to do something to get his mind off of 1930 and the Mayor’s wife—to say nothing of the Mayor’s wife’s maid. After all, he’d just been spreading a little good will.

But he didn’t get to Engineering. He ran into Smullen on the autowalk. Smullen looked worried.

“I’ve just been down to Special Features,” he said. “Asked them to check up on Pluto and do their best to dig up some dates for us to cover. After all, Pluto runs the Outer Planet League, and *Solar News* is the biggest link between Pluto and Earth. If Pluto gets unhappy, the four outer planets may

pull away from the Solar Union, and definitely that would be not good for the peace of the System.”

“I’ll try to dream up something,” Stieve promised. He was so grateful to Smullen for letting him get out of 1930 that he would have promised to bring back the anchor of Columbus’ flagship.

Smullen caught the cross-walk to his own suite. “See me in the morning.”

“Okay,” said Stieve. He felt rather sorry for Smullen. In dreaming up the idea of news reporting in time, the guy had really raised *Solar News* by its own boot-straps, and Stieve knew that a billion and a half a year was not peanuts even to *Solar News*—to say nothing of the possibility of losing Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. Those three probably contributed five or six billion a year.

Well, as soon as Stieve should get back from 1492, he’d go to work on Pluto and he’d come up with something that would make Smullen very happy. Stieve made a silent promise to that effect.

Then he met Murphy and said, “How about trading posts?”

Murphy said. “Nix. I’ve just been through the Crusades, and that was tough. Nothing else is going to happen for ten years, when the Mongols will invade Europe, so I’m going to take it easy. I’ve been working hard ever since the Magna Charta was signed.”

Stieve was disgruntled. Murphy always was lazy, anyway. Stieve got off the walk at Engineering, then he saw it was only twenty minutes till takeoff time. He turned around and went back. His time cartridge would be ready just after lunch, at fifty-four o'clock, to be exact, under the metric system of counting time. That wasn't general yet, but the Time Travel people used it exclusively.

He took the air-tube to Medlock's post. Medlock was watching the clock as Stieve came in.

"Make it fast," he said. "You're due in a minute and a half."

"I hope Prem has got things organized," Stieve said as he settled into the straps.

"Don't worry," Medlock advised. "Prem always gets things organized. That's what I like about old-style robots. They have originality. These new androids are nice-looking and all, but they haven't got the brains of a sick goose."

Stieve had a familiar feeling of ominousness as he heard Medlock's remark about Orig Prem's organizational ability. He hoped—

The time cartridge whirled. Stieve was slightly sick; the coruscating spiral of vari-colored lights always bothered him. Then it steadied. Stieve closed his eyes for the feeling that was like a free fall. He opened them when the acceleration stopped.

He was standing on a warm, sandy shore. There was a ship a mile out at sea, her canvas billowing—and two caravels. He wished he had thought to bring a glass so he could check the names for sure. Then he heard a voice behind him—a deep, guttural, grunting voice:

“Lookum through telescope, mister. Ten cents for seeum Santa Maria. Only ten cents forum look, mister.”

Stieve jumped a foot. But before he could turn around he knew the answer. Orig Prem had had two weeks on this island that now, on the twelfth day of October, 1492, was called by the Indians Guanahani—and two weeks—well, Stieve should have known better.

The Indian was naked except for a breech-cloth and a feather in his hair. But he had a telescope set up, with a sign on it that said, “See Columbus’s ships just as if they were in your own back yard. 10c. U.S., 2230.” And in small letters: “Orig Prem Enterprises.”

Stieve paid the dime. Yes, it was the *Santa Maria* and the *Pinta* and the *Niña*, and in spite of himself Stieve began to be thrilled. He snapped a good picture of the three ships and punched the button to wind the film when a fat little redskin came running down the beach and thrust a card into his hand. The card said, “Have your films developed at Joe’s. Twenty-four-hour service. Licensed by Orig Prem Enterprises.”

Stieve snorted. He began to look around. He was in the center of a regular old-fashioned Coney Island beach, with a couple of hundred huge striped umbrellas, and fat Indian chiefs lying in the sand while their squaws built sand castles over their stomachs.

Stieve groaned. He thought: Thank goodness Prem couldn’t get a ferris wheel in the time cartridge.

Stieve lit a cigarette. Almost immediately a giant breech-clouted redskin picked the cigarette out of his mouth.

“No smokum on beach,” he told Stieve. “Anyhow, this Fourteen-Ninety-Two. White man doesn’t haveum cigarettes yet.” He took a puff on Stieve’s cigarette and gagged. “Ugh. Tastum terrible. How you smokeum that stuff. Smellum like old tires burning. Oh, pardon me, we don’t haveum tires yet.”

“Hey,” said Stieve, “where’s Orig Prem?”

The Indian brightened. “Oh, Prem very fine fellow. He head of Chamber of Commerce Welcome Committee. He very busy man today.”

“If you ask me,” Stieve said dryly, “he’s been busy for two weeks.”

Quickly Stieve went to the nearest popcorn stand. The sign said: “Fresh buttered popcorn, 1930 style, 15c. Orig Prem Enterprises.”

Stieve said, “One bag, please.” Then he stared.

The girl, dressed in a freshly starched blue apron, was lovely. She had nice, soft copper-colored skin, black, shining hair in two big braids, and large, lustrous black eyes.

“Say,” said Stieve, “you ought to be in pictures.”

She blushed becomingly. “That’s what Mr. Prem says. He thinks he can get me a screen-test.”

“Oh, blast Prem!” Stieve paid for his popcorn. “Just the same,” he said, staring, “you can come and play in my yard

any time you want to.”

“Oh, thank you, sir.”

Stieve went out toward the dock. It was covered with red and yellow bunting. The three ships apparently were anchored now, and he thought they were getting ready to put out some rowboats. Stieve looked around. It wasn't like Prem to miss anything. Prem hadn't. A board painted black said:

BULLETIN BOARD

Santa Maria due at 2:15. On time. Advertising space on reverse side of this board, by courtesy of Orig Prem Enterprises.

Stieve snorted hard. But when he reached the dock and saw the be-feathered dignitaries of Guanahani sitting importantly around the microphone, and Prem bustling to and fro arranging things, he was somewhat mollified.

Prem had mounted the video scanner very nicely, and now the boats were putting out. Yes, it looked like a good day. He shook hands with Prem, and Prem was as delighted as a little puppy. He introduced Stieve to the chief, and said:

“If you will handle the microphone, sir, I will do my utmost with the scanner.”

“Okay. But how long a speech is old Pain-in-the-Face going to make here?”

“I have asked him to cut it short, but he's Acting Mayor. He has his own ideas.”

“Well, we'll make the best of it. What's the program?”

“Program, mister? Program?” A ten-year-old Indian thrust a program in Stieve’s face. “Twenty-five cents, mister. Only got a few left. Can’t tell a Spaniard from an Indian without a program.”

Stieve sucked in his breath and looked at Prem, but Prem was very busy adjusting the microphone for height.

The program said, “Address of welcome, 3:15 P.M. Reply by Sr. Cristoforo Colombo.”

Well, the boats were pulling up. A tall man stood in the prow of the first one. He had white hair and beard, his nose was aquiline and his eyes blue. He faced the beach regally, but when the boat was grounded he leaped overboard and waded through the water and strode up the beach.

“And to think,” Prem muttered, “that I built this dock to save him from getting wet!”

But the tall man strode up to the grandstand. The big Indian chief rose to meet him.

“How!” he said gravely. “I makeum you welcome to New World. This great day for you, black day for Indians. But this history. I greetum you. Have a smoke.”

The tall man’s eyes were dancing. “Thank you very much,” he said gravely. “Smoking has not been introduced in Europe as yet. But I could go for a drop of wine.” He added: “I am very happy to be here. It was a long trip.”

“Will you please step closer to the microphone?” asked Stieve. “We’re on the air in 2230, you know. Ladies and gentlemen, you are hearing the voice of Mr. Christopher Columbus.”

The tall man looked doubtfully at the microphone, but Prem smiled and nodded encouragingly. The tall man stepped closer as if he was about to swallow the microphone. “Hello, mom,” he said gravely. “It was a wet crossing, but we made it. I hereby declare America officially discovered.”

Stieve scowled at Prem. “Did you have to teach them so much slang?”

Prem discreetly averted his eyes.

Well, it was soon over. Stieve unhooked the microphone.

“It was a darn good broadcast, at that,” he told Orig.

“Thank you, sir,” said Orig, squirming with happiness.

“Now let’s take our stuff and get back home. Where’s the tube?”

“At the other end of the beach, sir.”

Stieve was almost run over by a bare-footed newsboy who ran through the crowd shouting, “Extry! Extry! Columbus discovers America! Read all about it.”

“How much?” Stieve growled.

“Ten cents, mister.”

“It’s a gyp,” Stieve said, as he paid.

“It’s an extra, sir,” Prem reminded him.

“And it will be quite a souvenir piece.”

He started Prem into the cartridge. Just then, however, the big Indian cop came running across the sand, followed by a girl wearing a blue apron. She was pointing at Stieve.

“That’s the man, papa,” she said.

The big Indian took hold of Stieve’s shoulder and spun him around. “Did you promise marryum my daughter?”

Stieve gasped. “I should say not.”

The girl sobbed. “He said that I could play in his yard all I wanted.”

“That offer of marriage in Guanahani,” declared the big cop. “You stickum by offer, hey?”

Stieve almost swallowed his tongue, then leaped forward. Orig Prem had stuck his head out of the cartridge and was yelling at the Indian. Stieve halted, jerked Prem out of the cartridge and jumped in himself. He slammed the door tight and pulled the lever.

[Illustration: As Stieve halted, Prem yelled something at the Indian.]

What on earth or in time-stream would Smullen say if this got back to 2230? He hoped Prem could get back all right, but if he couldn’t, it would serve him right. It was all Prem’s fault. It was a wonder Stieve hadn’t been served with a breach of promise suit. Prem was undoubtedly the world’s best organizer. The only thing was, he didn’t know when to stop.

Well, anyway, Smullen would be tickled to death over the broadcast today. It had been a dandy. Snappy, modern. None of the long speeches that had been rampant in the 1930’s.

He came to when Medlock lifted the cover.

“Hey, Smullen wants you right away!” said Medlock.

Stieve felt expansible. He took the fast walk to Smullen’s suite. But his mouth dropped when Smullen glared at him.

“You prize dummy!” Smullen roared. “While you’re off gallivanting around the Fifteenth Century, you overlooked the one date in history that would appeal to Pluto.”

Stieve licked his lips. “What—what do you mean, sir?”

“Do you know when Pluto was discovered?”

Stieve swallowed. Whatever the answer was, it would be bad. “No, sir.”

“March 13, 1930.” Smullen snarled. “Three hundred years ago today. One more day and you’d have had it. But no, you had to start traipsing around in time—”

Stieve felt terrible. He hadn’t wanted to let down Smullen.

“Can’t I cover it tomorrow, sir?” he pleaded. Out of the corner of his eye Stieve was aware that Orig Prem had entered and stood just inside the door.

“No!” said Smullen. “That’s zigzagging. Time Travel won’t allow it. You’ve been going back exactly three hundred years, and tomorrow you’d have to go back three hundred years and a day. They won’t stand for it.”

Stieve felt miserable. Orig Prem spoke up. “I think we can still make it, sir,” he said apologetically.

“What do you mean?” Smullen growled.

“The date, sir. I’ve just discovered this really isn’t March thirteenth. Today is March twelfth. Tomorrow will be the thirteenth.”

Frowning, Stieve looked suspiciously at Prem. “How do you know?”

“Well, you remember what I told you about leap-years?”

“Yes.”

“Well, leap-years aren’t the only means of adjusting the calendar. There is also an adjustment to correct what is known as the lunar error in the Metonic cycle. The calendar is to be adjusted by omitting a day at the end of seven periods of three hundred years each and then one at the end of four hundred years. It was first applied in 1800, and should have been again in 2100. But this is what happened, sirs!”

Orig Prem faced them, and his chromium-plated face was shining.

“During the Last War, when men were underground and the calendars were pretty much destroyed, there wasn’t any central authority, and they forgot to omit the day in Twenty-One Hundred. Therefore today is really March twelfth.”

Stieve grinned. He clapped Prem on his steel back. But Smullen was discouraging.

“Time Travel’s rules still hold,” he said. “No zigzagging.”

“Ah, yes,” said Prem, “but I have investigated that. Your contract with Time Travel calls for trips exactly three hundred years from now. They will begin to abide by it, won’t they?”

Smullen began to smile. “I believe you’re right. Okay.” He whirled to the intercom. “Get me Calendar and get me Legal. Overtime for both departments tonight. We’ll get this intertemporal date-line straightened out, and you, Stieve, get ready for a trip to Nineteen-Thirty tomorrow.”

Only then Stieve realized that he didn’t dare go to 1930. He went outside glumly. Orig Prem came behind him.

“It’s really all right, sir. I didn’t have time to tell you before, but Medlock fixed things up for you—for us—in Nineteen-Thirty. He promised to bring the mayor into Twenty-Two-Thirty to let the Mayor watch the sky-tractor putting floors on the Liberty Tower. The Mayor will probably get his Doctor’s in Sidewalk Engineering for that, sir, and he was very pleased. He said he would forgive me for everything, sir.”

Stieve stared at Prem a moment and then he heaved a big, thankful sigh.

“Prem,” he said, with a rush of gratefulness, “you’re the best organizer on earth. You’re worth a dozen androids.”

Orig Prem blushed modestly. “Thank you, sir. I’m only trying to live up to my built-in principle, sir: ‘A helpful robot is a happy robot.’”

[The end of *Date Line* by Benj. Miller]