

The Twice and Future King

By David Vickery

Cockroaches were everywhere, scuttling frantically over each other and through the straw stiff with filth. Rats moved in the shadows. But what struck us most was the smell. Rotten meat, human ordure, stale vomit, burnt human flesh. Ahead of us were three jailers, thick-stubbed and snoring in the light of a guttering candle. That was good since it saved us the trouble of stunning them.

And there lying on the floor in front of us was the object of our visit. He too was asleep, or more likely unconscious. He wore only a shirt which had once no doubt been pristine linen but was now stained with mud and blood and hanging in shreds. His left leg stuck out in an angle human anatomy had never intended and his body, even his face, was smeared with excrement. Cobwebs, sawdust and lice mingled in his hair. Ulcerated sores disfigured his legs.

"Multiple fractures of the left leg, cracked and broken ribs, ruptured spleen, contact burns, contusions - " enumerated Webster as he scanned the body, a faint crease of distaste in his lips.

"But he'll live?" I asked.

"And advanced malnutrition. I'd give him only days more if he stayed here."

With difficulty we raised him up. Emaciated as he was, his frame was still a handful. He was taller than either of us, or would have been if his wracked limbs had let him stand upright. We were gentle, but still a moan escaped him. It sounded as though his throat was scarred with days and weeks of screaming. Silently we left the reeking prison room with our human cargo.

Even with proper medical care it was many days before his recovery was assured. But long before that we'd taped his mind and copied his body, the template coercing the cell matrix into the identical shape and form, right down to the dripping sores on his legs. And we'd played the tape into the copied brain. Although he had only days of life left, he was going to live his time out.

Jowett and Gilbraith took the body back. They had a fancy to see what Pontefract Castle had looked like. It had been dismantled after the English Civil War, but in the year 1400 it was well and truly in its prime. Webster and I made no protest. One look had been enough for us.

While we waited for the patient to recover we let the learning tapes insinuate themselves into our minds and watched the newscasts with gloom and depression. The blockade continued. Our universe was shrinking fast. Our worlds were changing hands. And soon we would be down to one world, Earth: and then we'd be crushed out of existence by an alien nation who refused even to speak to us.

"It's a nice irony," Webster commented. "We thought we'd conquered death, but the old boy was just kidding us along."

"We'll see," I said. "We've still got a card to play."

The card in question was getting better by the day, and it wasn't long before I stood in his room ready for our first conversation. In medieval French. Another of Webster's ironies.

I hardly recognised the figure in the bed. His shorn hair was fast growing back - clean, lustrous and yellow. The gaunt hollows in his face were filling in, the broken bones already knitted together as good as new.

I looked at him. Back in the castle he had been hardly a man. But now I could believe he was the son of Edward the Black Prince, hero of Poitiers, the grandson of Edward III, hero of Crecy...Webster's voice came over the link, telling me he was bringing him out of therapy trance.

"Your majesty," I said.

He opened his eyes and focused them on me. His face was pale, his look passionate.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Peter Ransome, majesty."

"Where am I? This is not Pontefract...?" He pronounced it "Pumfret".

"We - my fellow conspirators and I - rescued you from Pontefract, majesty. You were on the threshold of death when we found you. This is London."

"London!" he shrieked. "The stronghold of that usurper Bolingbroke! We cannot..." he looked around him seemingly for the first time and his voice trailed away. Sunlight streamed through the window of his room in timeless fashion, but the window itself was framed in bright metal. The room, free of sharp angles, glowed in soft colours that underwent constant subtle rearrangements in the shifting sunlight and shade. Lightpanels ran in strips along the ceiling. He felt the metal of the bed frame behind his back, held the unfamiliar material of the bed coverings in his hand, took in my clothing...when he spoke again, his voice had an almost pathetic appeal in it. Asking for something he knew he would not understand.

"How is this London, Peter Ransome?"

I told him that it was not important, that I would explain in good time. It was no use. Webster, over the link, told me of his racing pulse, the panic, the hysterical outburst just below the surface; and in any case I could see for myself the sweat on his forehead although the room was cool. I spoke, more calmly than I felt.

"And does it even matter, majesty? You were king of England, until Henry Bolingbroke seized your crown. In a few short months you lost your title, your land, your last supporters - and were about to lose life itself. The game was played out and you were beaten.

"But the game need not be over. You need not lose. With our help, majesty, you can be king again: of a new England, if you will. Somewhere beyond the grasp of Bolingbroke, or of anyone else who could thwart your ambitions. Millions of subjects, millions of men and women, waiting for you to rule them again.

"And I have not yet spoken of the greatest prize, majesty. You ruled England for only a handful of years. How if I told you that you could rule for a hundred years - for a thousand years?"

Webster's voice whispered in my ear again, but I didn't take in the words. I saw that the sweat had dried on Richard's face; and I saw that he was looking at me in a new and

calculating way, a half-smile playing on his lips. He might have understood nothing about where he was and what was happening, but he knew about power all right.

Back down the timestream in 1348 an array of artificial satellites ringed European space in a cat's cradle of geostationary orbits. We'd put a lot of effort into those satellites - although their basics had been in place even as early as the twentieth century. Perhaps that was always our problem: a disinclination to move into something truly new. I'm sure the alien race bearing down on us had no such flaw.

But the mother ship which had released the satellites: ah, there I really think we had done something special. The *Alecto* was a behemoth, vast enough to carry millions - and at a time when our resources were strained to breaking point, you might say it broke them. But what use would those resources be in a few years' time in any case?

Yes, a behemoth. If the Great Wall were visible from space, then surely the *Alecto* would have been visible from Earth, if those sword-wearing, gunpowder-powered cavemen below could have taken in such immensity. But of course we'd made sure it wasn't visible.

But if it couldn't be seen, it could certainly see - with truly remarkable precision. It saw ships manned by dead crews floating listlessly in the Mediterranean, it saw harvests uncut in the fields. Farm animals stood unattended across the countryside, while in Paris and in equally prestigious cities wolves roamed the streets, fighting dogs, pigs and cats for the unburied dead. And what it saw, it recorded.

The next time I saw Richard it was only a day or so later: and yet already he had changed. Of the confusion, the incipient hysteria, there was no trace. Instead, he had a request. Almost a demand.

"I want Anne," he said.

"Anne?" I said stupidly.

"My first wife."

I understood then, although Gilbraith was the history man. I began to protest: but I had hardly started when he interrupted me.

"You have gone to great lengths, Peter, to bring me here," he said. He smoothed the material of his shirt in an almost effeminate way as he spoke, and I remembered - or the learning tapes remembered for me - that here was a man credited with inventing the handkerchief. An apocryphal tale perhaps; but in an age of barbarians, of bestiality, here was a man who had personal latrines for himself and his inner court, who enjoyed hot baths, who loved sophisticated food.

"Great lengths," he continued. He glanced towards the window as he spoke and the implication was not lost on me. Although he had been confined to his room he had clearly put his time to good use. The view from that window might have blasted the mind of many a fourteenth century citizen; but Richard had apparently looked the earth-shaking conclusions in the face.

"With the Lord's mercy you chose me from all history, Peter. Me out of thousands. And I am grateful. What I endured at Leeds, at Pickering and especially at Pontefract, no man should have to face." He shuddered at the recollection. "I am grateful, but I also realise that you want me for a purpose. I am more than willing to fulfil that purpose. But I ask a boon of you. My one true love."

"You must understand, majesty, that what we did cost us great effort and great pains. The expense, the danger - "

He shrugged. "What you can do for one you can do for another. Anyway, that is my price."

I realised then how intelligent he really was; the history books had not lied. He had gone from confusion to understanding overnight and his evaluation was crystal clear. We had chosen well.

Gilbraith and I handled the mission. We swept back down the timestream to 1394, but this time to a royal palace instead of a castle. The gloom and filth gave way to lightness and sweet air. Sheen, Richard's favourite of all favourite places, royal barges moored by an island in the Thames.

We materialised when Anne and a maid in waiting were alone in the room. Gilbraith stunned the servant from behind so she would remember nothing.

Anne's eyes met mine. As with Richard, the entirely justifiable fear was displaced by something else: nobility, perhaps. She stood looking at me haughtily until I triggered my stunner and she collapsed to the floor.

Gilbraith was looking around him, as impressed as I was. "You did the right thing, Peter," he said. "I'm sure of it."

We turned her over onto her back. "I didn't have much choice," I said.

"His best years were with her. She kept him on the rails, you know. When she died - a month or so later, apparently - he razed this palace to the ground in anguish. He never really recovered. Who knows what he might have done?" He crossed to the far wall to admire a wall painting which glowed red and gold in the morning light.

"What does she die of?"

"She would have died of the plague. Now her copy will."

I was surprised. "The Black Death in a royal palace?"

"The fourth horseman was no respecter of rank, Peter. You know that."

I looked down at her. There was a strength in her face, an openness, that took me by surprise.

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-eight," he said without turning.

At that moment, I knew for the second time that I was doing something worthwhile.

The first time I had that knowledge was in 1348. We walked through the great walled city of London in the month of November, filters covering our mouths and noses. No one glanced at our nondescript black clothing, although it was worthy of attention; its strongly ionised surfaces repelled even the smallest airborne particles. No-one had time for anything but their own problems.

This was the first outbreak of the great slayer, the Black Death, although it would sweep Europe in two and twenty year cycles in decreasing intensity for nearly three hundred years. The stench, the stacks of bodies by the roadsides, the unchecked fires and the sounds of despair were everywhere. Occasionally we heard manic revelry coming from a tavern.

Bubonic plague was the original mass murderer. Within a week of infection, over half its victims would have died horribly, in fever, delirium or a macabre dance of death. It was easy to spot the infected from their black rashes - the so-called rosies - and their

egglike swellings in armpit, groin or neck. I had seen its work in reports from the Alecto's computers.

But traumatic though the pictures were, they hardly affected us, hardened by images of more efficient modern destruction. So we went down in person in August, to a little Wiltshire village called Bishopstone. There, Gilbraith, Webster, myself and some of our followers watched as virtually the entire village succumbed. As we stood silently, a woman ran out of a house and fell on her knees in front of us, her pale, scarlet-blotched face entreating us for mercy. Even her sweat was fetid. Perhaps she took us for physicians, perhaps for priests, although many of both orders had fled and the ones who remained could give little comfort. And we were equally helpless. Although we had the power to cure, we had to let the dying die.

Bubonic plague slew indiscriminately throughout that hot summer, and perhaps some hoped that the cold weather would bring them respite. A cruel irony; it brought a yet worse killer in the pestilence's pneumonic form. The plague bacillus lodged in the lungs and sprayed out in blood from the nose. It killed in 24 hours and left only two per cent of its victims to recover. The twisted and rotting bodies might have been ancestors of Webster's, of Gilbraith's, of mine.

Hard, almost unendurable, though it was to watch, it had to be seen: because I now knew what so many men, women and children would be spared thanks to our efforts. Even as we strode through London, microscopic airborne droplets carrying death to countless thousands, the Alecto's satellites logged every human. As a result, we knew which people would survive the plague and which would not. We could take as many as we liked as those who were about to die without changing history. Large numbers of the Alecto's crew had already been active that Summer, jumping back a few days after each outbreak, identifying men and women marked by the plague for death and shuttling them up to the waiting ship.

"People talked about the losses of the twentieth century's great wars, and rightly so," said Gilbraith, his civilised voice a shock amidst the chaos. "But the Black Death killed a third of Europe's population in this year and the next alone. By the time of the third outbreak in 1369, the population had halved. A higher mortality rate than the twentieth century expected from a full-scale nuclear war. Think of the people, perhaps of genius, we're saving. And not only them but their descendants. Another Shakespeare, another Bach!"

"Another Pasteur, another Einstein," offered Webster.

I was silent. At that moment I was watching a man collapse in the muddy street ahead of me. He coughed several times and then lay still.

"Let's get out of here," I suggested.

It was not long after that trip, from my point of view, that we shuttled Richard up to the *Tisiphone*. He looked fit and well. I introduced him to Jowett, Filmore and Webster and he was the soul of courtesy.

The conversation turned to the Black Death. Grisly subject that it was, it was familiar to Richard and he listened attentively to my descriptions.

"Tell me, Peter," he asked. "You say that this time is a thousand years from my own. Do you know what caused the Great Mortality?"

I looked at Webster. "Yes, your majesty," he said. "It was caused by fleas."

"Fleas?" he looked as if he thought we were joking. "Such devastation?"

"Even so, your majesty. Their bites brought sickness and death. The fleas themselves were carried across Europe by black rats."

Richard was silent for a while. "It is hard to believe," he said. "And yet it is easier to believe than what many said, that the Lord had forsaken us and visited the pestilence on us as a punishment."

"Many of us now find it difficult to believe in God, your majesty." There was sardonic irony even in Webster's honorific. I thought Richard would be angry; but he only laughed.

"Not believe in God? You may as well not believe in the air you breathe."

I caught sight of Webster's face and intervened. "As to the Great Mortality, majesty, this and many other things we will explain on the journey."

"The journey to New England. Yes. Will we go there in a ship?"

Jowett, as the physicist, took up the story. "A sort of ship, your majesty. A ship that sails not on the sea but through the heavens."

"Indeed?" said Richard politely. "Can we see it?"

"As your majesty wishes," I said, and turned on the shuttle's viewing screen. The *Tisiphone* stood proud, metal gleaming in the light of the sun: and all around it, the icy blackness of space.

"Ah!" cried Richard, throwing up his hand involuntarily. And yet although fear was his instinctive reaction, there was another tone in his voice: exultation at the magnificence of the scene, recognition that at last here was power undeniable.

I thought something of the same. I had seen the ship before, of course, but never close to. Earth's last great effort. It would have been dwarfed by the *Alecto*, back in the timestream, and would also have been no match for the alien vessels which encroached ever nearer. But there was a defiance, even a kind of glory about her. Perhaps the simplicity of medieval French was infecting me.

"That is a ship indeed. Does she have a name?"

"The *Tisiphone*."

He smiled. "Apt, is it not?"

I realised I didn't know the reference. The ship names had been some conceit of Gilbraith's, and he was waiting for us on board. My face must have shown my confusion.

"The avenger of blood. One of the three Furies, or Eumenides as my old tutor had it." He seemed delighted to know something I didn't. "From what you told me about the nation which wars with you and the woeful losses you have endured, it is surely apt. Do you have two sister ships?"

"Only one, the *Alecto*."

"*Alecto*, the implacable. She who rests not. But no *Megaera*? No jealous one?"

"No."

"Then I will be your third Fury."

We took him on board and Gilbraith introduced him to the captain who showed him round the fittings of the ship; and imperceptibly, it seemed to me, it became Richard's ship. The first of his new fleet.

Perhaps the first stage of the journey, although it took no time at all, was the most remarkable. The captain gave the order and the temporal field engaged: and in the blink of

an eye we were in late 1347, occupying the self-same space the *Alecto* would fill under a year later, looking down on an Earth free of industrial pollution and unaware of alien nations, yet about to be plunged into its worst natural holocaust.

Or perhaps the second stage was more remarkable still. Powering up our massive engines until we were travelling at 99.99% of light speed, our forcefield protecting us from the fragments of space dust which our extreme velocity would otherwise make lethal.

But I knew that even these wonders were eclipsed for Richard when we gave him his wife back as we had promised, just after the voyage began. She had looked confused and lonely, the shock of her surroundings undermining her sanity: but then Richard entered the chamber and nothing else mattered any more.

Anne sank to her knees, clasping her hands around his legs, and he raised her up and embraced her, his tears of joy mingling with hers. She stroked his cheeks with her delicate fingers, wondering again: he was the same yet different, six years older than the last time they had met. He caught her confusion and kissed it away.

"I know," he said. "Through so much, and all this strangeness too. But none of it matters. We have each other."

"My lord," she said.

Procyon V had no special name. Richard had dubbed it "New England", and that was fine if he wanted it that way. All that mattered to us was that it was uninhabited, was far enough away from Procyon to make it Earth-like, and had enough natural resources to sustain a world of people. Our journey had taken over eleven years, but from our relativistic viewpoint it had lasted just over a month. The year was 1359 on Earth, but we decided to simplify matters and call it year one.

We shuttled down on a sunfilled morning, flying over oceans and forests, woods and lakes. I looked over to Richard and saw that his eyes were shining. His kingdom, which had once dwindled to a Yorkshire castle, had now expanded to include a whole world.

All that first week, our people shuttled down themselves and the animals with which they intended to stock the world. Next we brought down the fabricators, and other machines; and for weeks and months after that, Filmore's construction workers were busy building towns and cities for the population who would inhabit them.

I was walking with Richard one day as the towns began to rise. Anne, as always, was nearby. He had expressed surprise at the houses.

"The wooden houses of your day had floors of bare earth mixed with rushes which might be ten years old or more," I said. "Ceilings were of straw, animals shared rooms with men and women, and bodily waste was simply flung into the street. We're giving your people houses from about two hundred years later: brick walls, floor carpets and tile roofs. And latrines connecting to sewers."

"Latrines? For the common people?"

Yes. These and the other improvements are essential to prevent the spread of disease."

"The people will not understand. They will go back to their old ways."

"By the time they arrive here, majesty, they will understand."

It was one night towards the end of year one that I came across Jowett. Like me, he had never married, so I wasn't surprised to see him watching the skies when others were warm in bed.

"The night sky's just as beautiful here as it is from Earth," I said.

"Yes. It'll be clear of industrial smog for a few centuries yet," he answered.

"And then one day it'll be as clear as this again, just like home."

"Perhaps. Who knows how it will go? He pointed to a star. "There's your Earth. But don't call it home any more. This is our home now."

"And Algol? That's where the aliens came from, isn't it?"

He pointed again, nodded. "We backtracked their route to somewhere in that direction. It seems the likeliest location from what we know."

"I wonder what they're doing, right now? On Earth Richard hasn't even been born yet."

"Well, whatever they're doing, they're doing it about two hundred years ahead of us."

I saw Richard again just before his palace was completed.

"I shall call it Sheen," he said proudly. "Although it looks nothing like the palace I ordered burnt to the ground."

"It will be warmer and far more comfortable," I assured him. We watched the builders for some time in the vibrant Spring breeze.

"A beautiful day, and a beautiful world you have brought me to," he said. I agreed, but something in my manner caught his ear.

"You are restless, Peter Ransome," he said. "Do you miss your old home? This is far better, I think."

"Majesty..." I began. I didn't know what to say.

"Why do you not take a wife, Peter? All your friends have. You are my friend, and I want you to be happy."

I felt humbled and honoured at the same time. "Thank you, majesty," I said. "I suppose I never found anyone when I was young. And now, somehow, it's too late. I am over two hundred years old, majesty, although my body is still as it was when I was thirty. When I see girls of my own age, they are old inside. Their minds are old and jaded - although with each renewal there is a brief Spring. But like this Spring, it never lasts."

"Are there then no true young in your time?"

"Very few. Couples wishing to bear a child must have a special permit from the central authority. We keep the population at the same level. But we do not copy minds before eighteen years have passed, and sometimes there is an accident."

"Is that why you have never married, Peter?" his intuition amazed me.

"She was nearly eighteen, majesty. Two years younger than I was. A freak happening...her head was crushed. Her mind was gone. She was gone. She will not come again."

"Ah." He laid a hand on my shoulder. "It is hard. I know. When the Great Mortality carried away my Anne, I was distraught. I was inconsolable. But she did come again."

"That is different, majesty."

"Perhaps. And perhaps not so very different. Did you not tell me that your *Alecto*, she who rests not, arrives at New England soon with ten million souls? Might there not be one amongst so many for Peter Ransome?"

The *Alecto* arrived two weeks later. It had jumped several times through the fourteenth century, collecting men and women marked to die throughout Western Europe; then jumped back to 1348 again to start its journey here. When we looked up in the morning light and saw it blotting out half the sky even we were astounded. And over the next weeks it shuttled down Richard's ten million souls.

They had spent the journey in therapy trance, the learning tapes dumping masses of information deep into their long-term memories via the cerebral cortex. They knew, instinctively as it were, about sanitation and the importance of personal hygiene; and about the white-garbed Instructors, who would answer all their questions for them.

We brought them down in relays and finally woke them from trance simultaneously with a broadcast signal. Their last memories had been of their own little areas of Europe and the next thing they knew they were in this new place. But thanks to the tapes, there was much that was familiar amongst the strange. Here were houses, livestock and land just waiting for them; here were friends they remembered. And it was a beautiful world.

One Summer's day in year four I was walking through the houses and fields on my way to the home of Kate's father. The sights I saw were pleasant to me. The people were healthy, well-fed, robust. Their buildings were clean and spacious, their streams and rivers sparkling and full of fish, their livestock flourishing in pens outside the houses. It was a far cry from their cramped, overcrowded and dirty surroundings on Earth; but thanks to the tapes, so much of that seemed like a dream to them. This was their only reality now.

The people I met in the streets and lanes greeted me deferentially on seeing my white clothing: the sign of an Instructor. Kate's father had been similarly impressed, I remember. A deference mixed with a hint of fear, as always.

Richard's advice had stayed with me, and I searched through the hordes of arrivals until I found Kate a few months ago. Inevitably, I suppose, her face reminded me of someone whose short life would not even begin for eight hundred years, and on a far distant planet whose star shone unremarkably in the night sky. But her mind was very different. There was a naivety, an openness that apparently young girls of my age had lost long ago. If they had ever had it. She refreshed me like Spring wine and I felt myself young again. I spoke to her father and he was honoured to name the betrothal day.

Now the Instructors were at work in their slow and insidious way. When a couple got married and wanted a new house, they went to the guild of builders. The builders were taught their new skills by Filmore's men; and something more. They were everywhere, showing the builders each time some new improvement, some added feature. Each enhancement was a minor thing, scarcely noticeable. But each added to the last and accelerated the development of housing month by month, year by year.

Similarly with Webster and the physicians. Their hazy knowledge, of a few facts derived from Arabic and Greek masters mingled with a plethora of superstitions, rituals and humbug, was winnowed and subtly built on.

Jowett's task was even greater. There were almost no true scientists beyond a handful of monks engaged in arcane research. But he and his people sought them out, as

well as other likely candidates: those they found building better water-wheels and windmills, designing cathedrals and abbeys, constructing carriages and ships. And to these they gave the first tantalising suggestions of science, starting them on a process that would lift their gaze from the earth to the stars.

Of the Instructors, only Gilbraith and I had no staff to supervise. All his work had been done in the planning stage of the great project. He had already retired to the country, available for consultation but outside the stream of events. Because history, his view of history, was effectively over. Something new had begun, where knowledge of another planet's past was of limited use.

And as for me, I had been chosen for my communication skills - which were needed most of all to reassure Richard and get him to agree to our plan during the Earth-based stage. I might still be called upon, perhaps, since Richard apparently trusted me and valued my advice. But like Gilbraith I too could see no need to stay in the centre. I would settle down with Kate in this beautiful countryside and watch the development of this old and new race.

Such was my intention.

It was eight years later that Gilbraith came to see me. Kate, standing at the great windows, pointed out the escort, the horse and the white clothing, although she could not see who it was at this distance. But it was an Instructor, and that was enough to get excited about.

I watched her as she rang for the servants and bustled about, ordering food and wine and rooms prepared. She was as lithe and vivacious as ever, but something had died in me. If it had ever really lived. She didn't understand the music I played, the books I read, the ideas I wanted to speak about. We were literally worlds apart. I had deluded myself; my love would not come again. But we were friendly still. I had lifted her into a position of importance and her whole family with her.

I greeted Gilbraith. He had obviously renewed recently and looked younger than I did, his hair strangely untouched by grey. Yet despite his outward appearance he always seemed the typical middle-aged academic, fussily sorting his facts.

"I'll be glad when we can do without horses for travel," he said.

"What brings you here?" I asked him.

"Richard, of course."

"What about him?"

"Absolute power and all that." He caught my eye. "I'm almost beginning to wonder whether we did the right thing."

"You're talking about his wars on the other nation groups? He is a medieval monarch, after all. What else did they do with their time?"

"You should get out of this backwater occasionally, Peter. All that's done and dusted, with Richard clearly top dog. But now he's trying to turn back the constitutional clock. Overthrow Magna Carta."

"And why not? It was never signed on this planet."

"If you can't be serious -"

I smiled. "Seriously, then, don't forget he was attempting something similar on Earth. Only lack of money - and his lack of grip on reality after Anne died - prevented him."

"But an absolute monarch? A despot? Is that what we want?"

"You're the history man, Gilbraith. We've had a thousand years of committees, equality and political correctness, and where has it got us? To virtual annihilation at the hands of the Algolans. But I suppose you want me to speak to him."

He looked up in appeal. "If you would, Peter. If you would. He has always listened to you." He looked unsure, a man at odds with himself.

It was my first visit to the completed palace of Sheen. The throne room was truly magnificent, panelled in some wood like oak and bedecked with flags and armour. And there sat King Richard of England, second of that name, with his wife Anne of Bohemia and Luxembourg by his side. Eleven light years from Earth.

He seemed delighted to see me. "Peter Ransome!" he cried. "You have been too long away. Let us walk in the rose garden."

He had his arm about my shoulder as we walked, a rare honour. The flowers were certainly not roses, but I let it pass.

"Gilbraith tells me you plan changes to the constitution, majesty," I said.

"Changes?" he laughed. "Restorations, more like."

"Magna Carta was a long time ago, majesty."

He frowned and let his arm fall to his side. "Is the business of state your business, Peter Ransome?"

"It has been once, and could be again."

"Listen to me, Peter." He grew earnest. "Those restrictions were imposed by barons who were largely seeking power for themselves. And anyway, such strictures were only necessary because of the ineptitude of John." He saw the doubt in my eye, and he became impassioned, stammering his words. "Listen, Peter! I always knew I was special. I always knew I was born for greatness. Ever since I, a mere stripling, stood off those armed hordes of Tyler's while my elders sat about pale-faced and let London go to perdition. Let me take this power and see yourself how well I use it. You want a man of strength to lead this new world; let me be that man - "

His last word ended in a gasp as he collapsed forward into my arms, an arrow riving him through from spine to sternum. A terrible sound, worse than the blood and the horror on his face.

"Keep your promise, Peter Ransome," he whispered as he sank to the ground. And I knew that the horror was not from the shock or the injury, but from the fear that we might forsake him.

But of course we kept our promise. While the palace guards found and slew the marksman in the grounds - New England's first political activist - we took Richard's body to a booth.

The booths looked like any other buildings, but were clearly demarcated as the property of the Instructors. This was enough to do away with the need for guarding, although we'd made sure the walls were stronger than they looked from the outside.

We found the mind recorder in a purse about his body. Webster was summoned to handle the template himself. There was no difficulty, but it was a momentous occasion. The cell matrix matched itself to the second template, the one we'd taken soon after Richard had fully recovered from the attentions of the Pontefract jailers: and when the body had formed in all its identical glory, we played the tape into its tabula rasa mind. So the copy changed from a thing into a man. His eyes opened.

"Peter Ransome!" He looked about him. It was his first time in a booth but he always learned so quickly.

"I died, then?"

"This morning, majesty. At the hands of one who objected to your constitutional changes. The guards caught him."

"And this is truly me? In every aspect?"

"Identical, majesty. Only your memories are slightly lacking. They end at yesterday evening when you took the last recording."

"Yes, we never remember our deaths. We find it more tasteful that way," remarked Webster.

"But I feel wonderful! So much younger!" Richard cried.

"Your body is twelve years younger, majesty."

He looked at us with awe. "So even here you did not lie. I doubted in my heart, but you were truthful. You are indeed immortal. You are gods."

"Immortal yes, gods no. Gods don't make mistakes," said Webster sardonically.

Richard's changes went through, speeded by the attack on his royal person. He was an autocrat, an absolute ruler from an earlier age: a William the Conqueror, a Viking chieftain. And yet all the time history ran faster and faster. Perhaps he was in truth more like a Chief Executive than a chieftain.

The years and then the decades went by. I died; I was reborn, and each time I was thirty years old. Each time was a little like Spring. But each time, that Springtime was more fleeting.

I remember year 100 as the time when steam power was formally introduced. I watched them merrymaking around maypoles as a passable imitation of Stephenson's Locomotion No.1 chugged gently along behind them. No-one was especially interested; the Instructors had always said that things would change fast, and this was just another change.

Kate was not there to see it. As the partner of an Instructor, she had the right to permanent renewals, but had decided to take her privileges elsewhere. It was an amicable parting.

As for the ordinary people, they were born, lived out their lives and died, just as they once had on Earth. But these were healthy people, well fed and well educated. Their numbers burgeoned. Their children had the time and the leisure to give themselves to things other than scratching a living, and increasingly, led by the Instructors, they gave themselves to science. There were half a dozen promising Newtons already.

I visited Richard and Anne in their palace of Sheen many times over the next century, and they even honoured me with visits to my mansion. It was no longer the backwater it had been; population pressure and new houses brought ever increasing numbers into my neighbourhood. But most of the time I kept largely to myself. Even my old colleagues on the project ceased to visit me. My body was perennially young and my mind as fresh as ever, but that mind now held the experiences of three hundred years. There was nothing new under the sun, even when the sun was called Procyon. It was difficult to get worked up about new developments, or even about Richard's machinations. We had set in motion an experiment which would run to its conclusion; and what could any of us do about that?

But when I saw on the news - it must have been year 190 or so - that a group of conspirators had been arrested for treason and that Webster was among them, I knew it was time to act. I called my servants and asked for my carriage. They looked at me strangely, fear and deference all over again, and then they led me to the gleaming white chauffeured automobile.

It didn't look like a model 'T' or a Chevrolet, or any other internal combustion engine car of twentieth-century Earth. It was a car of Procyon V. The pupils were starting to free themselves from the ways of their masters.

I didn't recognise the houses as we passed through the streets. They corresponded to no development of Earthly housing. But I saw plenty of people, and they looked fit and well, untainted by the terrible diseases, the poverty and the lack of opportunity that had soured so much of Earth history.

And Sheen I did recognise. It seemed hardly to have changed from the outside. A bulwark in time and space.

Inside, Richard greeted me as always, but there was something at once timorous and defiant in his manner. Leaving Anne alone for once, he led me down to the dungeons of his palace. There was nothing of Pontefract about them: they were clean and white and vermin-free. But still there were rows of men and women, manacled and chained to the wall.

"They were plotting treason, Peter," he stammered, his pale face flushing. "I have all the papers. There is no doubt. And as you know, there is but one penalty for treason."

"But not Webster, majesty," I said, dumbfounded. "He is not your subject."

"We were wrong, Peter!" Webster called out to me. "We can't let this continue! There are no rights of the person, no freedom of speech, nothing! Terminate the project now!"

A guard struck Webster in the face and blood filled his mouth. Richard turned to me as if unaware of any interruption.

"Is he not, Peter? You are all my subjects now."

"I won't have it." I realised I was speaking without a plan, something it was dangerous to do in this man's company.

"And what will you do, Peter Ransome?"

"You'll release Webster, and all these others - or we'll refuse to renew you when your next time comes."

Richard laughed. "My scientists can operate the booths. It's a simple process, they tell me."

"Then one of us will kill you and destroy your mind recorder. Even your scientists couldn't replicate that yet."

Richard looked me in the eye. "A good bluff, Peter, but only a bluff. In my talks with you about your war I believe I've discovered your true purpose. This whole project was conceived and executed to give mankind a chance against your adversaries. Would you really kill me and bring the entire vast enterprise to an inglorious end?"

I looked away, but he had seen something in my glance.

"No good. You will never reach your shuttles, even if you could bring yourself to try again with some more pliable subject. My troops guard the shuttle bays night and day. The next time the avenger of blood sails, it will be at my bidding. Go back to your place in the country, and leave me to my rightful vengeance."

He had me, and he knew he had me. But when I watched the executions on television and saw afterwards the traitors' heads paraded on pikes, included Webster's, I wondered what it was we had unleashed.

After this public display there was virtually no resistance to Richard's despotism. He saw to it that the instruments of control were fully in his hands. In any case, his nation of scientists found more and more that there was a kind of equality in the world of ideas, in the pursuit of technology for its own sake.

The years and the centuries flew by. The houses changed, cities leapt tall into unpolluted skies. And in orbit around Procyon V, a great fleet began to be built.

I was surprised to receive an invitation from Richard to visit him at Sheen in the year 970. He had been distant ever since my demonstration to save Webster, all those lifetimes ago. But he greeted me with gaiety.

"Come in!" he cried. "You have forgotten your chronology, I see. This is the year on Earth in which you plucked me from Pontefract Castle: 2429, in the old calendar. I thought you would like to see some revenge. This is what you wanted, is it not?"

And at that my ancient spirit grew truly young again for a moment; but I suddenly remembered. "The drive. It takes eleven years to get to Earth. By that time, the blockade will be - "

"Tush, Peter!" he laughed. "You don't imagine we're trammelled by such restrictions, do you? Come and watch," he said, gesturing me to a chair and turning on a screen.

The pictures were astonishingly good; far better than the newscasts I used to watch on Earth. We were there in orbit around Procyon V with the fleet: and suddenly it vanished en masse, to reappear before the Algolan blockade. The Algolan ships were mighty things, wielding huge energies and sheltering behind powerful shields, and the shining ships of Procyon were small and frail-looking. But their energies were greater and their shields absolute. One by one then all together the Algolan vessels burst asunder, light flaring into the darkness of space like a maddened bewildered protest.

I sat back. "So it was all worthwhile," I said. "Earth abides."

"Yes, Earth abides, but men go and come," answered Richard. "Look. This is my flagship, the *Megaera*. One ship will be sufficient." As we watched, the flagship moved out ahead of the fleet, vanished from the place of destruction, and winked back into existence in orbit around Earth. The planetary defences were soon brushed away, and then devastation swept down. The screen showed men, women and children dying agonisingly in the *Megaera's* energy fields.

"Stop! What are you doing?" I cried.

"Taking my revenge on the heirs of Bolingbroke," he answered coolly.

I was shaking, more moved than by anything for over a thousand years.

"You are a tyrant. Webster was right. Cold, heartless, inhumane."

"Yes," he said, "I remember your account of your visit to Bishopstone during the Great Mortality, where you stood and watched a whole village die when you could have saved it. It seems we are much alike, Peter Ransome. And now let us go."

"Go where?" I said dully.

"To the shuttle. The *Tisiphone* is quaint and outmoded, but it is fitting that she should bear us back as true avenging Furies. And I think I can spare a month of immortality to take me back to my rightful kingdom."