

The Man from Time

Frank Belknap Long



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The method by which one man might be pinpointed in the vastness of all Eternity was the problem tackled by the versatile Frank Belknap Long in this story. And as all minds of great perceptiveness know, it would be a simple, human quality he'd find most effective even in solving Time-Space.

the

man

from

time

by ... Frank Belknap Long

Deep in the Future he found the answer to Man's age-old problem.

DARING MOONSON, he was called. It was a proud name, a brave name. But what good was a name that rang out like a summons to battle if the man who bore it could not repeat it aloud without fear?

Moonson had tried telling himself that a man could conquer fear if he could but once summon the courage to laugh at all the sins that ever were, and do as he damned well pleased. An ancient phrase that—damned well. It went clear back to the Elizabethan Age, and Moonson had tried picturing himself as an Elizabethan man with a ruffle at his throat and a rapier in his clasp, brawling lustily in a tavern.

In the Elizabethan Age men had thrown caution to the winds and lived with their whole bodies, not just with their minds alone. Perhaps that was why, even in the year 3689, defiant names still cropped up. Names like Independence Forest and Man, Live Forever!

It was not easy for a man to live up to a name like Man, Live Forever! But Moonson was ready to believe that it could be done. There was something in human nature which made a man abandon caution and try to live up to the claims made for him by his parents at birth.

It must be bad, Moonson thought. It must be bad if I can't control the trembling of my hands, the pounding of the blood at my temples. I am like a child shut up alone in the dark, hearing rats scurrying in a closet thick with cobwebs and the tapping of a blind man's cane on a deserted street at midnight.

Tap, tap, tap—nearer and nearer through the darkness. How soon would the rats be swarming out, blood-fanged and wholly vicious? How soon would the cane

strike?

He looked up quickly, his eyes searching the shadows. For almost a month now the gleaming intricacies of the machine had given him a complete sense of security. As a scholar traveling in Time he had been accepted by his fellow travelers as a man of great courage and firm determination.

For twenty-seven days a smooth surface of shining metal had walled him in, enabling him to grapple with reality on a completely adult level. For twenty-seven days he had gone proudly back through Time, taking creative delight in watching the heritage of the human race unroll before him like a cineramoscope under glass.

Watching a green land in the dying golden sunlight of an age lost to human memory could restore a man's strength of purpose by its serenity alone. But even an age of war and pestilence could be observed without torment from behind the protective shields of the Time Machine. Danger, accidents, catastrophe could not touch him personally.

To watch death and destruction as a spectator in a traveling Time Observatory was like watching a cobra poised to strike from behind a pane of crystal-bright glass in a zoological garden.

You got a tremendous thrill in just thinking: How dreadful if the glass should not be there! How lucky I am to be alive, with a thing so deadly and monstrous within striking distance of me!

For twenty-seven days now he had traveled without fear. Sometimes the Time Observatory would pinpoint an age and hover over it while his companions took painstaking historical notes. Sometimes it would retrace its course and circle back. A new age would come under scrutiny and more notes would be taken.

But a horrible thing that had happened to him, had awakened in him a lonely nightmare of restlessness. Childhood fears he had thought buried forever had returned to plague him and he had developed a sudden, terrible dread of the fogginess outside the moving viewpane, the way the machine itself wheeled and dipped when an ancient ruin came sweeping toward him. He had developed a fear of Time.

There was no escape from that Time Fear. The instant it came upon him he lost all interest in historical research. 1069, 732, 2407, 1928—every date terrified

him. The Black Plague in London, the Great Fire, the Spanish Armada in flames off the coast of a bleak little island that would soon mold the destiny of half the world—how meaningless it all seemed in the shadow of his fear!

Had the human race really advanced so much? Time had been conquered but no man was yet wise enough to heal himself if a stark, unreasoning fear took possession of his mind and heart, giving him no peace.

Moonson lowered his eyes, saw that Rutella was watching him in the manner of a shy woman not wishing to break in too abruptly on the thoughts of a stranger.

Deep within him he knew that he had become a stranger to his own wife and the realization sharply increased his torment. He stared down at her head against his knee, at her beautiful back and sleek, dark hair. Violet eyes she had, not black as they seemed at first glance but a deep, lustrous violet.

He remembered suddenly that he was still a young man, with a young man's ardor surging strong in him. He bent swiftly, kissed her lips and eyes. As he did so her arms tightened about him until he found himself wondering what he could have done to deserve such a woman.

She had never seemed more precious to him and for an instant he could feel his fear lessening a little. But it came back and was worse than before. It was like an old pain returning at an unexpected moment to chill a man with the sickening reminder that all joy must end.

His decision to act was made quickly.

The first step was the most difficult but with a deliberate effort of will he accomplished it to his satisfaction. His secret thoughts he buried beneath a continuous mental preoccupation with the vain and the trivial. It was important to the success of his plan that his companions should suspect nothing.

The second step was less difficult. The mental block remained firm and he succeeded in carrying on actual preparations for his departure in complete secrecy.

The third step was the final one and it took him from a large compartment to a small one, from a high-arching surface of metal to a maze of intricate control mechanisms in a space so narrow that he had to crouch to work with accuracy.

Swiftly and competently his fingers moved over instruments of science which

only a completely sane man would have known how to manipulate. It was an acid test of his sanity and he knew as he worked that his reasoning faculties at least had suffered no impairment.

Beneath his hands the Time Observatory's controls were solid shafts of metal. But suddenly as he worked he found himself thinking of them as fluid abstractions, each a milestone in man's long progress from the jungle to the stars. Time and space—mass and velocity.

How incredible that it had taken centuries of patient technological research to master in a practical way the tremendous implications of Einstein's original postulate. Warp space with a rapidly moving object, move away from the observer with the speed of light—and the whole of human history assumed the firm contours of a landscape in space. Time and space merged and became one. And a man in an intricately-equipped Time Observatory could revisit the past as easily as he could travel across the great curve of the universe to the farthest planet of the farthest star.

The controls were suddenly firm in his hands. He knew precisely what adjustments to make. The iris of the human eye dilates and contracts with every shift of illumination, and the Time Observatory had an iris too. That iris could be opened without endangering his companions in the least—if he took care to widen it just enough to accommodate only one sturdily built man of medium height.

Sweat came out in great beads on his forehead as he worked. The light that came through the machine's iris was faint at first, the barest glimmer of white in deep darkness. But as he adjusted controls the light grew brighter and brighter, beating in upon him until he was kneeling in a circle of radiance that dazzled his eyes and set his heart to pounding.

I've lived too long with fear, he thought. I've lived like a man imprisoned, shut away from the sunlight. Now, when freedom beckons, I must act quickly or I shall be powerless to act at all.

He stood erect, took a slow step forward, his eyes squeezed shut. Another step, another—and suddenly he knew he was at the gateway to Time's sure knowledge, in actual contact with the past for his ears were now assailed by the high confusion of ancient sounds and voices!

He left the Time machine in a flying leap, one arm held before his face. He tried

to keep his eyes covered as the ground seemed to rise to meet him. But he lurched in an agony of unbalance and opened his eyes—to see the green surface beneath him flashing like a suddenly uncovered jewel.

He remained on his feet just long enough to see his Time Observatory dim and vanish. Then his knees gave way and he collapsed with a despairing cry as the fear enveloped him ...

There were daisies in the field where he lay, his shoulders and naked chest pressed to the earth. A gentle wind stirred the grass, and the flute-like warble of a song bird was repeated close to his ear, over and over with a tireless persistence.

Abruptly he sat up and stared about him. Running parallel to the field was a winding country road and down it came a yellow and silver vehicle on wheels, its entire upper section encased in glass which mirrored the autumnal landscape with a startling clearness.

The vehicle halted directly in front of him and a man with ruddy cheeks and snow-white hair leaned out to wave at him.

"Good morning, mister!" the man shouted. "Can I give you a lift into town?"

Moonson rose unsteadily, alarm and suspicion in his stare. Very cautiously he lowered the mental barrier and the man's thoughts impinged on his mind in bewildering confusion.

He's not a farmer, that's sure ... must have been swimming in the creek, but those bathing trunks he's wearing are out of this world!

Huh! I wouldn't have the nerve to parade around in trunks like that even on a public beach. Probably an exhibitionist ... But why should he wear 'em out here in the woods? No blonds or redheads to knock silly out here!

Huh! He might have the courtesy to answer me ... Well, if he doesn't want a lift into town it's no concern of mine!

Moonson stood watching the vehicle sweep away out of sight. Obviously he had angered the man by his silence, but he could answer only by shaking his head.

He began to walk, pausing an instant in the middle of the bridge to stare down at

a stream of water that rippled in the sunlight over moss-covered rocks. Tiny silver fish darted to and fro beneath a tumbling waterfall and he felt calmed and reassured by the sight. Shoulders erect now, he walked on ...

It was high noon when he reached the tavern. He went inside, saw men and women dancing in a dim light, and there was a huge, rainbow-colored musical instrument by the door which startled him by its resonance. The music was wild, weird, a little terrifying.

He sat down at a table near the door and searched the minds of the dancers for a clue to the meaning of what he saw.

The thoughts which came to him were startlingly primitive, direct and sometimes meaningless to him.

Go easy, baby! Swing it! Sure, we're in the groove now, but you never can tell! I'll buy you an orchid, honey! Not roses, just one orchid—black like your hair! Ever see a black orchid, hon? They're rare and they're expensive!

Oh, darl, darl, hold me closer! The music goes round and round! It will always be like that with us, honey! Don't ever be a square! That's all I ask! Don't ever be a square! Cuddle up to me, let yourself go! When you're dancing with one girl you should never look at another! Don't you know that, Johnny!

Sure I know it, Doll! But did I ever claim I wasn't human?

Darl, doll, doll baby! Look all you want to! But if you ever dare—

Moonson found himself relaxing a little. Dancing in all ages was closely allied to love-making, but it was pursued here with a careless rapture which he found creatively stimulating. People came here not only to dance but to eat, and the thoughts of the dancers implied that there was nothing stylized about a tavern. The ritual was a completely natural one.

In Egyptian bas-reliefs you saw the opposite in dancing. Every movement rigidly prescribed, arms held rigid and sharply bent at the elbows. Slow movements rather than lively ones, a bowing and a scraping with bowls of fruit extended in gift offerings at every turn.

There was obviously no enthroned authority here, no bejeweled king to pacify when emotions ran wild, but complete freedom to embrace joy with corybantic abandonment.

A tall man in ill-fitting black clothes approached Moonson's table, interrupting his reflections with thoughts that seemed designed to disturb and distract him out of sheer perversity. So even here there were flies in every ointment, and no dream of perfection could remain unchallenged.

He sat unmoving, absorbing the man's thoughts.

What does he think this is, a bath house? Mike says it's okay to serve them if they come in from the beach just as they are. But just one quick beer, no more. This late in the season you'd think they'd have the decency to get dressed!

The sepulchrally-dressed man gave the table a brush with a cloth he carried, then thrust his head forward like an ill-tempered scavenger bird.

"Can't serve you anything but beer. Boss's orders. Okay?"

Moonson nodded and the man went away.

Then he turned to watching the girl. She was frightened. She sat all alone, plucking nervously at the red-and-white checkered tablecloth. She sat with her back to the light, bunching the cloth up into little folds, then smoothing it out again.

She'd ground out lipstick-smudged cigarettes until the ash tray was spilling over.

Moonson began to watch the fear in her mind ...

Her fear grew when she thought that Mike wasn't gone for good. The phone call wouldn't take long and he'd be coming back any minute now. And Mike wouldn't be satisfied until she was broken into little bits. Yes, Mike wanted to see her on her knees, begging him to kill her!

Kill me, but don't hurt Joe! It wasn't his fault! He's just a kid—he's not twenty yet, Mike!

That would be a lie but Mike had no way of knowing that Joe would be twenty-two on his next birthday, although he looked eighteen at most. There was no pity in Mike but would his pride let him hot-rod an eighteen-year-old?

Mike won't care! Mike will kill him anyway! Joe couldn't help falling in love with me, but Mike won't care what Joe could help! Mike was never young himself, never a sweet kid like Joe!

Mike killed a man when he was fourteen years old! He spent seven years in a reformatory and the kids there were never young. Joe will be just one of those kids to Mike ...

Her fear kept growing.

You couldn't fight men like Mike. Mike was strong in too many different ways. When you ran a tavern with an upstairs room for special customers you had to be tough, strong. You sat in an office and when people came to you begging for favors you just laughed. Ten grand isn't hay, buddy! My wheels aren't rigged. If you think they are get out. It's your funeral.

It's your funeral, Mike would say, laughing until tears came into his eyes.

You couldn't fight that kind of strength. Mike could push his knuckles hard into the faces of people who owed him money, and he'd never even be arrested.

Mike could take money crisp and new out of his wallet, spread it out like a fan, say to any girl crazy enough to give him a second glance: "I'm interested in you, honey! Get rid of him and come over to my table!"

He could say worse things to girls too decent and self-respecting to look at him at all.

You could be so cold and hard nothing could ever hurt you. You could be Mike Galante ...

How could she have loved such a man? And dragged Joe into it, a good kid who had made only one really bad mistake in his life—the mistake of asking her to marry him.

She shivered with a chill of self-loathing and turned her eyes hesitantly toward the big man in bathing trunks who sat alone by the door.

For a moment she met the big man's eyes and her fears seemed to fade away! She stared at him ... sunburned almost black. Muscles like a lifeguard. All alone and not on the make. When he returned her stare his eyes sparkled with friendly interest, but no suggestive, flirtatious intent.

He was too rugged to be really handsome, she thought, but he wouldn't have to start digging in his wallet to get a girl to change tables, either.

Guiltily she remembered Joe, now it could only be Joe.

Then she saw Joe enter the room. He was deathly pale and he was coming straight toward her between the tables. Without pausing to weigh his chances of staying alive he passed a man and a woman who relished Mike's company enough to make them eager to act ugly for a daily handout. They did not look up at Joe as he passed but the man's lips curled in a sneer and the woman whispered something that appeared to fan the flames of her companion's malice.

Mike had friends—friends who would never rat on him while their police records remained in Mike's safe and they could count on him for protection.

She started to rise, to go to Joe and warn him that Mike would be coming back. But despair flooded her and the impulse died. The way Joe felt about her was a thing too big to stop ...

Joe saw her slim against the light, and his thoughts were like the sea surge, wild, unruly.

Maybe Mike will get me. Maybe I'll be dead by this time tomorrow. Maybe I'm crazy to love her the way I do ...

Her hair against the light, a tumbled mass of spun gold.

Always a woman bothering me for as long as I can remember. Molly, Anne, Janice ... Some were good for me and some were bad.

You see a woman on the street walking ahead of you, hips swaying, and you think: I don't even know her name but I'd like to crush her in my arms!

I guess every guy feels like that about every pretty woman he sees. Even about some that aren't so pretty. But then you get to know and like a woman, and you don't feel that way so much. You respect her and you don't let yourself feel that way.

Then something happens. You love her so much it's like the first time again but with a whole lot added. You love her so much you'd die to make her happy.

Joe was shaking when he slipped into the chair left vacant by Mike and reached out for both her hands.

"I'm taking you away tonight," he said. "You're coming with me."

Joe was scared, she knew. But he didn't want her to know. His hands were like

ice and his fear blended with her own fear as their hands met.

"He'll kill you, Joe! You've got to forget me!" she sobbed.

"I'm not afraid of him. I'm stronger than you think. He won't dare come at me with a gun, not here before all these people. If he comes at me with his fists I'll hook a solid left to his jaw that will stretch him out cold!"

She knew he wasn't deceiving himself. Joe didn't want to die any more than she did.

The Man from Time had an impulse to get up, walk over to the two frightened children and comfort them with a reassuring smile. He sat watching, feeling their fear beating in tumultuous waves into his brain. Fear in the minds of a boy and a girl because they desperately wanted one another!

He looked steadily at them and his eyes spoke to them ...

Life is greater than you know. If you could travel in Time, and see how great is man's courage—if you could see all of his triumphs over despair and grief and pain—you would know that there is nothing to fear! Nothing at all!

Joe rose from the table, suddenly calm, quiet.

"Come on," he said quietly. "We're getting out of here right now. My car's outside and if Mike tries to stop us I'll fix him!"

The boy and the girl walked toward the door together, a young and extremely pretty girl and a boy grown suddenly to the full stature of a man.

Rather regretfully Moonson watched them go. As they reached the door the girl turned and smiled and the boy paused too—and they both smiled suddenly at the man in the bathing trunks.

Then they were gone.

Moonson got up as they disappeared, left the tavern.

It was dark when he reached the cabin. He was dog-tired, and when he saw the seated man through the lighted window a great longing for companionship came upon him.

He forgot that he couldn't talk to the man, forgot the language difficulty completely. But before this insurmountable element occurred to him he was

inside the cabin.

Once there he saw that the problem solved itself—the man was a writer and he had been drinking steadily for hours. So the man did all of the talking, not wanting or waiting for an answer.

A youngish, handsome man he was, with graying temples and keenly observant eyes. The instant he saw Moonson he started to talk.

"Welcome, stranger," he said. "Been taking a dip in the ocean, eh? Can't say I'd enjoy it, this late in the season!"

Moonson was afraid at first that his silence might discourage the writer, but he did not know writers ...

"It's good to have someone to talk to," the writer went on. "I've been sitting here all day trying to write. I'll tell you something you may not know—you can go to the finest hotels, and you can open case after case of the finest wine, and you still can't get started sometimes."

The writer's face seemed suddenly to age. Fear came into his eyes and he raised the bottle to his lips, faced away from his guest as he drank as if ashamed of what he must do to escape despair every time he faced his fear.

He was trying to write himself back into fame. His greatest moment had come years before when his golden pen had glorified a generation of madcaps.

For one deathless moment his genius had carried him to the heights, and a white blaze of publicity had given him a halo of glory. Later had come lean and bitter years until finally his reputation dwindled like a gutted candle in a wintry room at midnight.

He could still write but now fear and remorse walked with him and would give him no peace. He was cruelly afraid most of the time.

Moonson listened to the writer's thoughts in heart-stricken silence—thoughts so tragic they seemed out of keeping with the natural and beautiful rhythms of his speech. He had never imagined that a sensitive and imaginative man—an artist—could be so completely abandoned by the society his genius had helped to enrich.

Back and forth the writer paced, baring his inmost thoughts ... His wife was

desperately ill and the future looked completely black. How could he summon the strength of will to go on, let alone to write?

He said fiercely, "It's all right for you to talk—"

He stopped, seeming to realize for the first time that the big man sitting in an easy chair by the window had made no attempt to speak.

It seemed incredible, but the big man had listened in complete silence, and with such quiet assurance that his silence had taken on an eloquence that inspired absolute trust.

He had always known there were a few people like that in the world, people whose sympathy and understanding you could take for granted. There was a fearlessness in such people which made them stand out from the crowd, stone-markers in a desert waste to lend assurance to a tired wayfarer by its sturdy permanence, its sun-mirroring strength.

There were a few people like that in the world but you sometimes went a lifetime without meeting one. The big man sat there smiling at him, calmly exuding the serenity of one who has seen life from its tangled, inaccessible roots outward and testifies from experience that the entire growth is sound.

The writer stopped pacing suddenly and drew himself erect. As he stared into the big man's eyes his fears seemed to fade away. Confidence returned to him like the surge of the sea in great shining waves of creativeness.

He knew suddenly that he could lose himself in his work again, could tap the bright resonant bell of his genius until its golden voice rang out through eternity. He had another great book in him and it would get written now. It would get written ...

"You've helped me!" he almost shouted. "You've helped me more than you know. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you. You don't know what it means to be so paralyzed with fright that you can't write at all!"

The Man from Time was silent but his eyes shone curiously.

The writer turned to a bookcase and removed a volume in a faded cover that had once been bright with rainbow colors. He sat down and wrote an inscription on the flyleaf.

Then he rose and handed the book to his visitor with a slight bow. He was smiling now.

"This was my first-born!" he said.

The Man from Time looked at the title first ... THIS SIDE OF PARADISE.

Then he opened the book and read what the author had written on the flyleaf:

*With warm gratefulness for a courage which
brought back the sun.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Moonson bowed his thanks, turned and left the cabin.

Morning found him walking across fresh meadowlands with the dew glistening on his bare head and broad, straight shoulders.

They'd never find him, he told himself hopelessly. They'd never find him because Time was too vast to pinpoint one man in such a vast waste of years. The towering crests of each age might be visible but there could be no returning to one tiny insignificant spot in the mighty ocean of Time.

As he walked his eyes searched for the field and the winding road he'd followed into town. Only yesterday this road had seemed to beckon and he had followed, eager to explore an age so primitive that mental communication from mind to mind had not yet replaced human speech.

Now he knew that the speech faculty which mankind had long outgrown would never cease to act as a barrier between himself and the men and women of this era of the past. Without it he could not hope to find complete understanding and sympathy here.

He was still alone and soon winter would come and the sky grow cold and empty

...

The Time machine materialized so suddenly before him that for an instant his mind refused to accept it as more than a torturing illusion conjured up by the turbulence of his thoughts. All at once it towered in his path, bright and shining, and he moved forward over the dew-drenched grass until he was brought up short by a joy so overwhelming that it seemed to him that his heart must burst.

Rutella emerged from the machine with a gay little laugh, as if his stunned expression was the most amusing in the world.

"Hold still and let me kiss you, darling," her mind said to his.

She stood in the dew-bright grass on tiptoe, her sleek dark hair falling to her shoulders, an extraordinarily pretty girl to be the wife of a man so tormented.

"You found me!" his thoughts exulted. "You came back alone and searched until you found me!"

She nodded, her eyes shining. So Time wasn't too vast to pinpoint after all, not when two people were so securely wedded in mind and heart that their thoughts could build a bridge across Time.

"The Bureau of Emotional Adjustment analyzed everything I told them. Your psycho-graph ran to fifty-seven pages, but it was your desperate loneliness which guided me to you."

She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it.

"You see, darling, a compulsive fear isn't easy to conquer. No man or woman can conquer it alone. Historians tell us that when the first passenger rocket started out for Mars, Space Fear took men by surprise in the same way your fear gripped you. The loneliness, the utter desolation of space, was too much for a human mind to endure."

She smiled her love. "We're going back. We'll face it together and we'll conquer it together. You won't be alone now. Darling, don't you see—it's because you aren't a clod, because you're sensitive and imaginative that you experience fear. It's not anything to be ashamed of. You were simply the first man on Earth to develop a new and completely different kind of fear—Time Fear."

Moonson put out his hand and gently touched his wife's hair.

Ascending into the Time Observatory a thought came unbidden into his mind: *Others he saved, himself he could not save.*

But that wasn't true at all now.

He *could* help himself now. He would never be alone again! When guided by the sure hand of love and complete trust, self-knowledge could be a shining weapon.

The trip back might be difficult, but holding tight to his wife's hand he felt no misgivings, no fear.

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