

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL OF BLOOD

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Also by Alan Robbins

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FOLLOWING THE TRAIL OF BLOOD

A Time Travel Mystery

By Alan Robbins

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Bloomington

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Following the Trail of Blood
A Time Travel Mystery Based on a True Story

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For Trudy as always
and for my Mom
who always loved
the gentle adventure.

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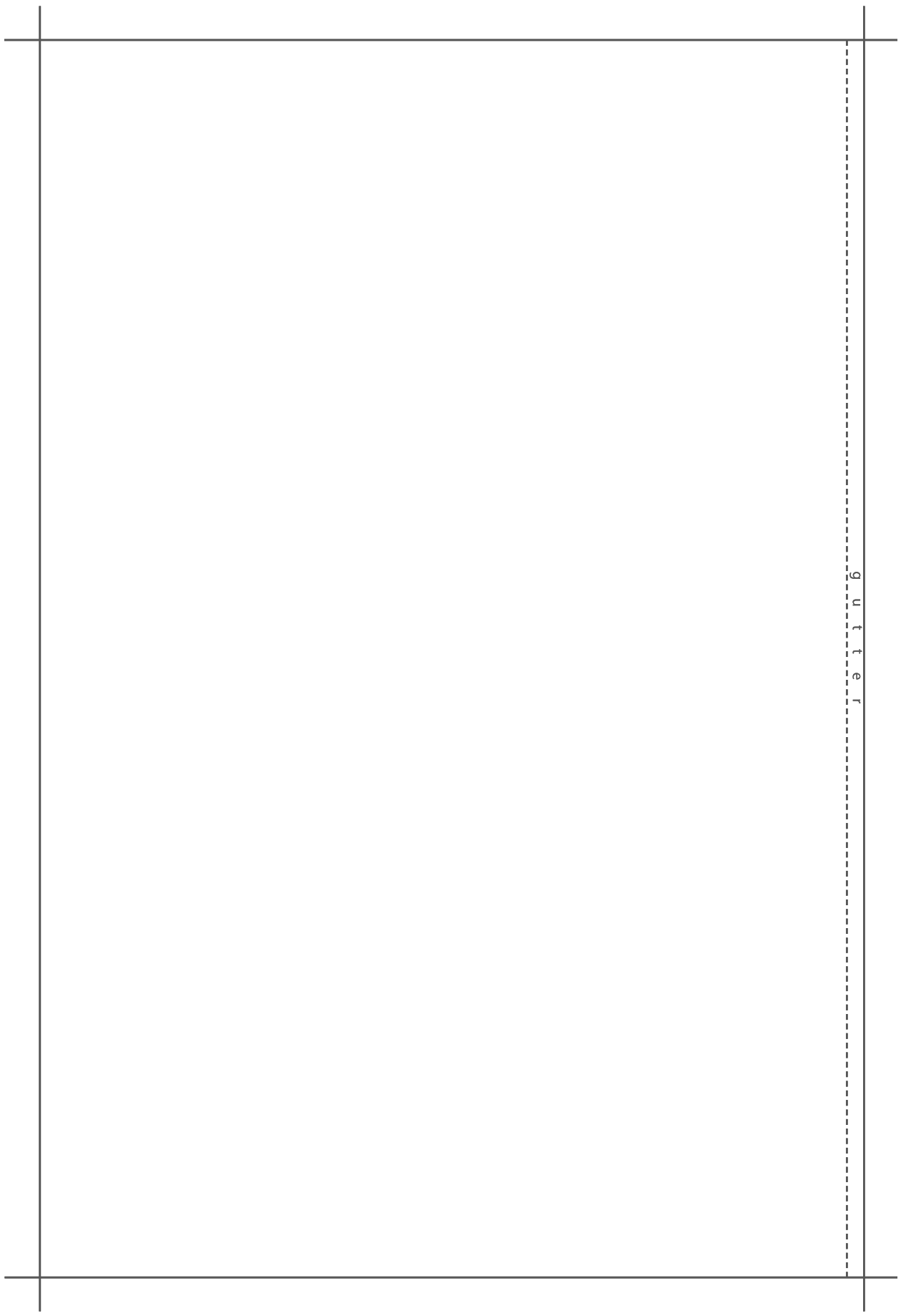
*Blood that wears treason in his face
Villain complete in parson's gown.
How much is he at court in grace
For stealing Ormond and the crown?
Since loyalty does no man good
Let's steal the King and outdo Blood!*

-John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester

CHAPTER ONE

In which your humble servant, having unwittingly slipped through a rip in time, tries to find a way back and is thereby set upon the trail of a notorious scoundrel.





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The Beginning

“This Colonel Blood,” he said with a strained voice, “is a devil, y’can mark me on that. And he’s no bloody Colonel or Captain neither. Not in this earthly realm.”

The White Prince stood perfectly still before the fire in the great room and swirled his mug of brandy.

The White Prince!

I can barely write those words without giggling like a ninny.

Yet there he was before me. In life, in truth, in fact. Lecturing me – me! – as if it were the most natural thing in the world. So naturally I sat there silently and listened. It would have insulted him to do otherwise.

But inside, I was all ninny wall-to-wall.

Sparks from the flames rose up and landed on his waistcoat, then vanished into the thick twill of the fabric. Fabrics, I realized, were damn itchy in those days and I could barely sit still in my own clothes; heaven knows how he could stand his. But the White Prince must have been thinking beyond his own discomfort as he communed with the head of a lion carved into the ornate mantelpiece. He had not said a word in many minutes but soon followed the path of his shadow on the waxed wooden floor and looked right at me.

“Yes, I see,” I said, but I was just reciting some dialogue from an old movie.

Acting was all I could muster. I did not know the White Prince, had no idea who Colonel Blood was, and not the slimmest hint as to why I was sitting there in the first place. And yet this codger seemed to know me right away when I arrived at his estate. Knew me rather well actually and asked me all about my own affairs. It was mighty weird but there I was, thrust into that movie, so I played along and ad-libbed as well as I could. Luckily I had acted a little in local theater and knew how to maintain my character.

Rather than lose my goddamn mind, that is.

“Let me start at the beginning when ye were still but a mere child,” he said.

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His accent made him hard to understand. It was Irish, that much I could tell, but with a hunk of Hungarian or something that I could not pin down. But he was also an old man and somewhat deaf and so he spoke slowly and carefully. I nodded to encourage him as he ran his fingers through the long white hair from which I assumed that he got his name. He put the mug down on top of the mantelpiece as he braced himself for the tale.

“As y’know it was in 1660, eleven years ago, that Charles II was restored to the throne of England. That was good news for Ireland after the indignities of that rat Cromwell. Good news for us, but nay so good for our friend Blood. His lands were seized by the Court of Claims and he was left penniless. You don’t empoor a scoundrel like that without consequences. And that was when it all began, my child, for ‘twas then he embarked on this life of thievery and villainy!”

As he placed his thumbs dramatically in his vest, another spark landed on his stocking but he seemed not to notice. With the fire blazing behind him, I could see only the cutout of his frail thin figure and that head brooding in the orange light. Like one of those toy shadow theaters. And thank goodness for that since it added a peg of levity that I desperately needed to hang my sanity on.

“Oh, he’s tricked many with his schemes ‘n plots. Not the least of which was your poor father, as y’know. Aye but the worst of it was this – that he played the devil against his own people, his own country. And in troubled times like these too, with England breathing down our necks and ready to strike again!”

The White Prince took a deep breath at that point and paced slowly back and forth. I could see that these matters about Blood and Ireland and the Crown were of grave importance to him even if they were no more than historical twiddles to me. But I tried to pay attention in case any of it held clues to help me with my predicament. My predicament...which was a lot bigger than some old coot with a vengeance. As he continued, an owl living in the rafters of the mansion flapped its way to a new perch to keep an eye on us below. The thought that owls were some kind of rotten omen flitted into my head, darted out.

“Ach, this is all old history to ye, I know,” he went on.

“Old, old history,” I said without exaggeration.

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“Old wounds, old wars. F’give me, I’m an antique of a soldier without the good sense to hang up me sword. Back to Blood then. He’s been in London these many months engaging in one black deed after another. But he’s known to associate himself with fools and ruffians and so none of his plans have worked out.”

The White Prince placed his hand behind his back and took a wider stance, giving a false impression of vigor but a true one of determination.

“I fear now that Blood has reached the end of his patience and is planning one last great crime to set himself aright. To win himself a fortune and earn the notoriety on which he thrives. This would be but the worse for Ireland for I’m certain we’d exact a heavy penalty for an Irishman’s exploits in London. They’ll call him an Irish patriot and have one more excuse to take away our lands. A patriot! Rubbish! My young friend, listen well...Blood is a rogue and nothing more!”

He slammed his hand on the mantel, the owl growled, I bounced. It all made perfect nonsense to me. I had no idea what this was all about; I was there by a simple accident of physics. Rogues and lands and the whole English/Irish thing...what did it have to do with me? Unfortunately, that answer was coming and it did not soothe.

Now agitated and irate, the White Prince stepped forward and again ran his bony fingers through his hair. The skin on his face was pale and mottled but the look in his eyes dimmed the antiquity. He quickly pulled back into the shadows as though trying to keep his face, if not his anger, a secret.

“I have other reasons, as ye might guess, for wanting Blood to fail. But I’ve said enoof for now. Y’must to London then and find him. But keep your own cover. Let no man know the nature of your adventure. Y’can only detain Blood with solid proof of the crime or, better still, catch him in the act of committing it. Otherwise he’ll slip through yer fingers like an eel. Do y’understand?”

Understand?

What I understood was that this little shadow theater had just turned into a horror show.

Did this fellow really expect me to go to London and catch Colonel Blood in the act of committing a crime? Arrest him, wrestle him

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to the ground, kill him? It was impossible, ridiculous. What did I know about 17th century London, let alone about blood and crimes and kings? I was a just a marketing director for a company that sold smart running shoes with computer chips in them. And to be perfectly honest, the shoes were not even *that* smart. They gave you some instant bioreadings, that's all. A dimwit in a clinic could do as much.

The venture he was describing could get me killed...or worse! So I got up abruptly and started to leave, looking for the way out. But the owl hooted and when I looked up it was eyeballing me with those creepy peepers. I froze and suddenly caught my reflection in a massive mirror on the rear wall. I had not noticed it before and the image in it shocked me cold.

It was not me!

Yes the reflection was wearing the clothes I had on all right, but the body was off, the head all wrong. Shape, posture, demeanor...wrong, wrong, wrong. I moved my arm and it moved its, lifted my leg and so did it. But my face – my familiar face, my hello face – was nowhere to be seen. I was not *me*. Stunned, I sat down again and, as a final insult, so did the reflection.

But it was the body of a total stranger that collapsed into that seat, drenched in unfamiliar sweat.

Before the Beginning

But I should rewind to the day before when I was sitting on my bed looking through a box of junk my Nana left me when she died. It was November 11, 2011 and the media was making a big deal out of it. You know...11/11/11. I did not believe any of that portentous crap; I was just cleaning house, deciding what to keep or toss.

At least that is what I thought then.

But I was no fool either. I knew that destiny had its own designs. Like that joke about how if you want to make God laugh just tell him your plans. Maybe that was the reason that I was not totally surprised to find myself suddenly spinning and stumbling. At first I thought it was a glitch in the electrical system, a sudden case of vertigo, or even another attack.

The usual stuff.

But slipping through a time rip?

I did not even believe that was possible. Of course I had heard the rumors. Articles, reports, youtubes. I just never thought that it would happen to *me*. Snap...just like that. Then again I suppose that no one ever does.

At the exact moment of the timeslip, I closed my eyes to block the dizziness and when I opened them again my bedroom was gone. I found myself sitting on a stiff wooden chair at a tiny desk in a small, sparse studio. The wide wooden floor and beams on the ceiling were dark and warped. A bay window with leaded glass was partially open and through it I could see sheep grazing in a meadow near some reeds and a pond. To the left there was a stable and some horses lolling in a nearby ha-ha.

All very bizarre...and what the hell was a ha-ha anyway?

A man in white stockings and a green coat was walking towards the pond and someone was shouting after him. The heavy smells of meat being cooked wafted up from down below. The sun was shining. It was a cool spring day and there I was lost lost lost in time.

But I do not do glum well and knew right away that there was no point brooding over the why or the wherefore. I'm a take-charge person. I knew it was an accident – a slippage – and that is just the way things go. Take it or leave it. So as I sat there in that strange chilly room waiting for my head to stop swimming, I knew the big question was not *why me* but *what now*. I had slipped through time through no fault of my own and now had to find my own way back. A kind of Survivor on the History Channel. No books to read, no experts to consult, no websites to access. Just me and my wits. But this insight came with one big fat doozy of a hold-your-horses...I had absolutely no idea how to proceed. I knew nothing about time or slipping or history or anything.

Then the knock on the door.

“Yes?” I said automatically, as though expecting a delivery of sushi. But the noise that came out of my mouth sounded alien to me and I jumped when I heard my own voice.

The door opened and a short, stocky woman in a light blue dress and white lace collar came in and silently handed me a leather folder. She seemed to be waiting for me to do something but when I thanked

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her, she looked at me oddly and retreated. I held the folder in my hand for a long time, anxious to see what was inside but spooked too.

When I finally got the courage to open the folder, I found a letter inside. And what a letter! Written in the most beautiful script I had ever seen with swashy descenders and swirly uprights. On paper as thick as skin and just as yummy. Lovely handwriting on fine paper was a thing of the past in my era of tapscreens and voice recog. In fact this sample alone would have been a bonanza on eBay.

It took me a long time to read that letter. It was in English all right, but four pages of stiff and formal language with reckless disregard for spelling. I was used to the zippy ads and zapped emails of the info highway, not to the dense and windy back roads of expostulation. Still, the phrasing and style of it gave me a better lock on the time and place I had slipped into. I examined that letter like a sacred text, probing it for meaning, groping at every detail. It explained not only where and when I was, but more importantly...*who*.

For this was indeed a country estate and I was the squire of it.

The place was Ireland.

The year...1671.

The letter described how ten years ago a certain Colonel Thomas Blood had swindled my father out of half of my family estate by pretending to be a long lost cousin. It explained how my father discovered the scam and went to the White Prince for help. The White Prince appealed to the King of England himself on my father's behalf and this helped to restore the lands to my family. But now that my father was gone, the letter continued, the estate along with all of its burdens had passed to me, the only surviving child. And along with these duties was a debt to the White Prince for his help in these matters. A coda at the end of the letter suggested that we Irish had to stick together now as always. The letter concluded by requesting my presence to discuss the repayment of this favor. It was signed with great curliness and a wax seal by the White Prince.

All very neatly laid out but not much help. I was a complete stranger there, out of sync with history, timeslipped and bobbled, with no promises to keep.

And I am not even Irish!

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Never been there, never thought much about it. In fact, making a mental note of everything I knew about Ireland – not just in that century but any – produced a very short list. The St. Patrick’s Day Parade, for instance, and I could not even recall what day that took place. Shamrocks, the potato famine, the IRA. Oh yes and Bono, the rock star with the funny glasses. You see the problem? I had nothing but scattered tidbits of pop culture and media debris to work with. The two dozen things anyone knows about anything that happened before they were born.

On the other hand I instantly knew that, ready or not, I had no choice. In the first place, the story in that pretty letter made me feel that such an important favor *ought to* be repaid. I also knew that one should honor the memory of one’s own ancestors and promises made and kept. That’s why I had been looking at that box of my Nana’s mementos back in my time in the first place.

Or maybe it was just my training in marketing that convinced me. I was used to evaluating new situations, thinking on my feet, coming up with solutions. Action was my cure for fear. So as I made arrangements for a carriage, I was already setting out my plan. After all, the simple fact was that – accidentally or not, willingly or not – I was now this other person. Irish heir to a country estate. I was living inside *that* life now, that pack of facts, and I had to follow it through to some resolution. Like a novel that you start to read and feel compelled to finish, rousing or lousy it does not matter. I had no other options, no other strategy than to follow the logic of this plot.

And hope to hell that it somehow led me home.

A Risky Pact

“No problem,” I finally said.

But the White Prince only glared at me as though I had insulted him. Maybe I had. Words evolve and maybe that slanguage meant something else back then.

“I mean...I accept, m’lord,” I corrected, shaking the White Prince’s hand. It was veiny and light as a feather but he did his best to squeeze back.

“This is my offer to ye then,” he said. “That upon fulfillment of this

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contract, and stopping Blood in his bloody tracks, all former liens and debts on your father's estate shall be forgotten. His name, and yours therefore, shall be cleared of all favors owed. Are we agreed then?"

"Agreed," I said and he squeezed my hand again.

My thumb came to rest just next to a leather wristlet he wore on his right hand. Like a watch band but there were no such things then. I looked at it more carefully and noticed that instead of a face, the band held a stone...a honey-colored stone engraved with a star. I felt queasy for a moment when I saw it; my knees got weak and my head floated. But in the tizzy of the instant, I barely stopped to note my own reaction.

"Good," he replied and retracted his hand quickly. "I can give ye very little help in the matter too, I'm afraid. But for this...you will take the ship from Dublin to get to England. There is in Dublin someone y'might wish to see. Her name is Lady Carnew. She is rumored to have known Blood whilst he lived here in Ireland and she may know a thing or two. And keep this with ye as well..."

The White Prince handed me a small square wooden snuffbox; I knew what it was from museums. But it was not filled with that powder that made you sneeze. Instead it held a tiny portrait, an etching of a man, darkly handsome, with a trim beard and intense piercing eyes. A determined man of desperate designs.

I immediately began to doubt my decision.

"This sketch'll help ye recognize the scoundrel. But take care. Our Colonel Blood changes faces as others change horses. He's been fat and he's been lean, a surgeon and a cripple, lover and killer. Look carefully at all ye see and notice well. Stop Blood by any means y'can. Good luck, my child, and may God go with ye."

And so the White Prince shoved me out into that alien world and I was on my way and from that point on it was all Blood, Blood, Blood. Racing through my worries like a flood.

Sorry about that, I dabble in copywriting now and then.

The owl was silent as I passed below it but it watched me the whole time.

Like a predator preying.

Of a Slippage in Time

An able narrator at this point would insert a crisp explanation of the timeslipping that started all this. But I am no sci-fi writer, just a mishap victim filling out an accident report. And besides, how can I hope to explain a process that I barely understand myself?

Suffice it to say that the physicists were both right and wrong. It was true that black holes were merely the end points of ravel in the space-time continuum. Basic 21st century physics. One could, theoretically, go into one end of a black hole at a certain point and emerge from the other end at an entirely different cosmic co-ordinate. In this way, according to classic modern theory, black holes were also timeholes or what they called wormholes. They formed a kind of subway system for travel through the matrix of the universe, that is, through space and time.

This is all a standard Hollywood backstory; you've seen the movies.

But the scientists were wrong in their understanding that this was a material process. It is not. For even weensy little quarks cannot penetrate the rules of time. Take, for example, the fact that the cosmos is forever expanding and churning and turning. Nothing is ever in the same place that it was. Now add that the universe is composed almost completely of emptiness – a grand dark vacuum containing only snips of matter – and what do you get?

You get the near certainty of slipping into one end of the hole and popping out smack in the middle of nothing nowhere nada, gasping for breath and imploding.

Bad enough.

But there is also the annoying little problem of time's arrow. You know this one too. The notion that bodies cannot exist before they are created. Effects do not come before causes. Women cannot go back in time and kill their own grandmothers and still expect to have their nails done before noon.

Etc.

You may also recall the theories that tried to accommodate these problems. Those speculations about alternate realities and parallel timelines and multiple dimensions. How you can be on one timeline, then make some dumb decision and shuttle over to an alternate

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universe and so on. But as everyone knows, these are all just so many screenwriting devices.

The fact of the matter is that matter itself is locked in time. There is nowhere for it to go but forward and no way for it to slip back. Our bodies, the very atoms themselves, are stuck in the here and now and this *nowness* is all there is.

Simple cosmic rule...matter cannot trick time.

But.

This is not true for consciousness.

Don't ask me how because, as you can tell by now, I am no physicist and even less a philosopher. The intricate infolding of mind and matter and the dance of consciousness in the universe are well beyond my abilities to suss. Suffice it to say, and here is the whole point in a nut, that consciousness alone can slip through time. It is the mind alone that can enter one end of the timehole and emerge at the other.

In sum...bodies cannot timeslip, minds can.

Thus it was by an encounter with a blip of a black hole – which can be smaller than a hiccup by the way – that my consciousness became unglued and went skeetering through the eons. At the other end, it emerged into the body of someone living in a distant coordinate. In other words, I had managed to slipslide not just into another era but into someone else's carcass. Someone alive in that particular sliver of eternity. That is why my reflection in that mirror had been so jarring. I was still myself mentally, cognitively, emotionally...as far as I could tell. But the body I was inhabiting like a rented skinsuit belonged to this Irish landowner with a debt to repay.

I was still me, but that me was him.

Creepy as hell, but there it is.

Received by Lady Carnew

The coach to Dublin was a long time going. As quickly as I had slipped across the wide universe, getting anywhere in this era was one long dawdle. Endless delays, detours, distractions. Bouncing and battering over the stone road, the coach lost a wheel somewhere near the Liffey. Under way again, one of the horses got a pebble stuck in her

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shoe. More delays. Eternity, I realized, was no vague construct; it was a coach ride from point A to B anytime before the Model T.

But it did give me time to study the little portrait of the man I was after, to fix that face in my mind. It was the face of a rogue all right. The artist had captured a certain daring in the expression, a twist of risk. Perhaps it was in the chill of the eyes or the sneer of the mouth, the high cheekbones or the point of the chin. Handsome yes, but not to be trusted; a mask that hid the secrets to a plan so bold I could not even imagine it.

At least not yet.

By the time I finally arrived in Dublin it was early in the morning, days later. I had no clue what to expect. In my own time, I never traveled much outside the United States. Dublin, therefore, was nothing more than a postcard in my mind or a clip in a docudrama about James Joyce. Finally stepping off the coach and into the street, I was amazed to find a bustling city and, despite coming from New York, I quickly felt assaulted. More people, more buildings, more horses than I would have imagined. And more tightly packed than Macy's at Christmas. That was actually comforting to me, city slicker that I was, and I bucked the crowds with the joy of a mall rat.

Lady Carnew's residence was near the harbor and her maid admitted me into the dark apartment where I sat down in a drafty antechamber and waited. Through a thick oak door, I could hear the lady complaining about the length of an 8-page letter she had just received from her sister. It seems that in this time the recipient paid the postage at the rate of eightpence a page.

Shifting in my seat, I again caught my reflection in a mirror and tried to face up to myself. There is nothing quite like looking into a mirror and getting back someone else. I have had dreams like that and they are never sweet. That foreign face, those fumbly hands scratching a fatter head. All very spooky but I kept looking, hoping that with practice I could get over the impulse to rip it off. It was not working but luckily the maid returned and led me into Lady Carnew's bedchamber.

In the custom of the day, she was sitting up in a resplendent bed near a window, dressed in elaborate flowing robes. The shapes and

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colors of Dublin seemed as shattered as a jigsaw on the other side of the thick glass. I stood calmly at the foot of the bed as she greeted me, holding my hat down at my knees as I had seen others do.

Lady Carnew was a ravishing woman in her forties I guessed. Her long thick red hair tumbled onto her green velvet smock, matching traces of broken color from the window. I followed the graceful gesture of her hand to a chair and sat.

“Forgive the delay,” she said in a voice as rich as parchment, “but I’ve a sister who insists on charging me for her prattle. I trust you have more sensible siblings.”

I said that I did not. I knew from the White Prince’s letter that I was the sole surviving child of my late father but the real me *did* have one brother. He was a lazy jerk with nasal hair who never got off his rump to help with the dishes. Of course he was irrelevant to her question since that rump would not see the light of day for another three centuries.

“Why has the Prince sent you to me?”

“Blood,” I blurted without finesse.

“My heavens!”

“I mean...we are trying to find Colonel Blood. We know he is in London but that is all we know. Can you help?”

Her verdant eyes lost their focus for a moment then returned to me.

“It’s Thomas y’want then? Ay, that won’t be easy. He’s here, there, and everywhere. And what would our White Prince be wanting with Mr. Thomas Blood?”

“A business matter,” I fibbed. “A matter of lands. Irish lands. Were you a close friend of Blood’s?”

A sly smile, midway between a grin and a leer, bent her full lips.

“I knew Thomas when he was here in Dublin. But I have not heard from him in two years now so I canna be much help. I know our Prince thinks Thomas is a rascal but I can tell y’that he loves Ireland and would give his life for her.”

“What might he be up to?”

“The nature of his plots he never revealed to me. Thomas keeps secrets as King Charles keeps young girls. But I will give y’this,” she said and handed me a slip of paper. “There is in Liverpool, where the ship

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docks, a man named Constable Wainrit. He is an Irish sympathizer and knows the doings of the Irish rebels in England. This slip of paper contains a poem. We use it as a secret code, the Brits being too damn stupid to a man to figure it out. If y'can come up with the answer, tell it to Wainrit and he'll trust you as one of us and tell y'what he can."

"And if I can't find the answer?"

"Then you are no Irish. I'll say no more about it."

As I took the note and thanked her, Lady Carnew tilted her head so that a voluptuous curl of hair tickled her cheek.

"And when you see Thomas, tell him that his lady waits," she said coyly as the maid closed the thick door behind me.

FYI

The experience of timeslipping, by the way, is as abrupt as stubbing your toe minus the sense of idiocy. I simply closed my eyes in this world and opened them in the other with only a vague throb and some dizziness. Not as jarring as you would think.

Besides – and looking for the *yespoint* as we say in marketing - there were many things about the slip that made it easier for me. Much of my new world seemed quite natural. For one thing I happened to have landed in a time still known to the history of my own. What would I have done about lunch in ancient Ur, for example? Secondly, this culture was a precursor to mine and therefore similar enough to recognize. Were there even bathrooms in the Hsia dynasty? And finally, the language spoken in this new world, although grating and dissonant, was familiar enough to be decodable after a few days. I would have hated everyone chatting me up in Middle Albanian.

Other than that, though, I did not have much to go on.

I did recall that book about the Connecticut Yankee by Mark Twain but it was not of much use. He was a mechanic who installed phones in King Arthur's court. What did I know? Sure I had centuries of history at my back, but none of it at my fingertips. My main asset seemed to be that I had a good rapport with people. It was part of my job. I could be friendly and make myself pleasant company. I was a good listener.

Plus, I had media on my side...movie truths, news tidbits, cultural

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trivia. And one weapon in my arsenal that no fictional timeslipper ever had...a BA in Liberal Arts.

I knew stuff!

D. I thought – calling myself by the name I use to get my own attention – this is the situation and you had better make the best of it. Focus. Work the problem. Eye on the prize and all that.

And the prize – the key to the whole thing – was Blood. Had to be. It all came down to him.

So I decided right then and there that my best hope for finding my way home was to do what the White Prince asked. I would use my assets to find Blood. I would engage as many people as I could, overhear as much as possible, make notes, pay attention. And slowly set up a strategy. And I was lucky in that too because above all this was a chatty time. Full of opinions, news, gossip. Plenty to listen to. It was talk, talk, talk and all jabbersnicky all the time.

Of course, I had no way of knowing the juice from the dross but that did not occur to me then. Nothing occurred to me but the way back. In my fantasy I would be the detective of my own mystery, follow the clues to the man with the sinister gaze, then look him in the eye and go swooshing down a tunnel of light back to my time.

Brother was I wrong.

Aside to the dear reader: there is no bigger fool than an upbeat one.

The Heaveguts Sails

The whole time on the coach to Dublin as I thought about the ship that would take me from Ireland to Liverpool, I imagined the Constitution or the Cutty Sark or some other nautical fantasy. I do not like being on the water and so created a great huge behemoth of a boat to protect me.

What I got instead was a bathtub with a flagpole.

It was called the Hovegats – a Dutch bark I think they called it – that had been won in some war and was now pressed into service as a ferry across the Irish Sea. It was sleek, I suppose, but all of sixty feet long. In my humble opinion, far too small to glide over the waves, too narrow to be steady on them, and too leaky to stay afloat. My berth,

if you can call it that, was a tiny alcove with a hammock near a pile of crates.

I came to refer to it as the Heaveguts.

The actual voyage took four hours and I split my time between puking and sitting on my traveling case to guard it. I had only taken two sets of clothes and some grooming items; the rest of the case was filled with coins and paper money. Although I did not want anyone to know it, I suppose you could say I was rich and thank heavens for that. Money, in that or any era, is always a bonus.

At one point on the deck, I took out that riddle that Lady Carnew had written down for me and read it out loud a few times:

*It has a bed but never sleeps
and has a mouth but never eats.
It runs but a rest it never takes,
and bends and bends but never breaks.*

I vaguely remembered that from some quiz show but every time I got close to a solution, I lost it with a toss of the keel. Then one of the mates, a scrawny fellow with a pointy snoot named Sims, approached me.

“Scuse me, m’lord, but I winkered onto that snipe of yaws aback.”

“You wha?”

“Sounds like youse got a toss to planny.”

“A toss? It’s the waves,” I said wiping my mouth.

“I mean that verse...it has a bed but nevah sleeps...”

“Oh that. That’s just a...”

“Irish keysong. Bit a’the expert on them matters, am I.”

“Do you know the answer to it?”

“Naw...but I knows what I knows. Whot’s yer tumble?”

I demonstrated some over the side of the boat.

“Whot’s your game?”

“I’m looking for someone,” I said.

“Creepin’ eh? Who you creepin’?”

“A man named Blood. Colonel Blood.”

I should not have said that but between heaves for that moment, I was not thinking straight and in any case his eyes suddenly lit up.

“Well now, let me see,” he said, scratching his stubble with

Following the Trail of Blood

claws. “Oy moyt know d’whereabouts o’said gentleman. But dis sorta inf’maytion costs some, don’tcha know.”

Sims rubbed the first two fingers of his right hand together. Even through the haze of time and nausea I knew this to be the universal symbol for bribery. I had coins in my pocket – that is, my body had coins in his – but absolutely no understanding of their value. So I threw a few of the smaller ones his way and that seemed to satisfy him.

“Moyty noyce piece a’silver dere,” he said, balancing the coins in his palm, “and worthy a’moy confidence.”

“Well?”

“Awright den, your Mr. Colonel Blood is also known ‘earbouts as John Mason. Under said name ‘e is stayin’ in Londontown. At’s where he is an’ where ‘e can be found.”

“What’s he up to in London. What is he planning?”

“A moyty fine questionin’ mind you ‘ave. Truly suited to one o’ them philos’phers in Caymbritch.”

“Well?”

Sims rubbed his fingers together again. More coins.

“You cayn’t imagine how yer faith in me touches me poor ‘eart.”

“Terrific.”

“Well den this is the skittle, so ‘elp me. Some toyme back, this ‘ere Blood and a feller named Frisle and some other toughs tried t’kidnap one a’dem dukes. In dis case bein’ d’Duke of Ormonde. But Frisle bungled d’job an’ the entire plan fell into d’ruddy pan.”

“Into what...a ruddipan?”

“D’ruddy bedpan. The plan...it went all to ‘ell.”

“Oh.”

“Now Frisle got away from d’clutches of our Johnny Mason, dat is Blood to you. Moy mates tell me that Blood’s gone to Londontown now to find Frisle and give’m whot he’s got comin’.”

“And what’s that?”

“You know...d’long an’ slender. D’birth cure. Jack d’knife.”

“He’s in London to kill this Frisle fellow?”

“A real true Caymbritch brain, you are.”

“Okay then, where can I find this man Frisle?”

“Loyke m’self, he’s a child o’d’sea. A sailorman. He’ll be at d’wharf

Alan Robbins

down near London Tower. But yew be careful and don't get y'self crimped."

"You mean robbed?" I asked.

"Naw. Crimpin's when dey knock you over d'head and haul your sad and sorry sack out to sea. Send you oarin' day and night f'Captain Morgan."

"Kidnapped?" I summed.

"A mind to pine for, you 'ave. But, oh dear, I gotta run," Sims said, getting up to work some of the mast ropes. "We's almost to shore and moy banker haytes to be kept waitin'.

I watched the sail catch the wind as it pushed the boat towards the shore of England and wondered whether the winds of fate would be as accommodating.

Then I threw up again.

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