




Gerd Maximovic

Mirror, Mirror

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Translated by Isabel Cole

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MORK'S BRIDES

Mork, the brilliant inventor, took a short break before the crucial moment; he wiped the sweat from his face, dried his hair, combed his moustache, wrung out his shirt and sprayed his mouth with a dose of freshness from a spray bottle, which also contained an alcohol base - all this to keep his nerves under control in the historic hour, to gain a little distance, a tiny pause, for he himself recoiled intellectually, as it were, before the significance of his discovery, though he had so often enacted it in his thoughts, at the drawing board, during long walks in the forest and in the sauna, after rolling in the snow, naked and screaming.

Then he took a deep breath and sprayed again, until his fluttering nerves had calmed themselves somewhat. He took a few steps back, pulled the mirror reflection camera out of the bag and took a few pictures of the machine which - glittering, covered with crystals, with chased embellishments, gleaming chrome trim and a hydraulic whistle at the top to vent the pressure - stood before him in a magnetic flask which was to ward off all turbulence which could arise from its launch.

Then Mork raised his eyes as if he were going to address the Lord himself, heaved a deep sigh, put away the camera, which he had almost forgotten he was holding, twirled his moustache, shook a few drops from his ears, blew his nose, and then, almost without transition, almost without thinking, he took a mighty leap toward the machine, on whose front mighty levers were resplendent, below them

scales which would display the days, the months and the eons.

Mork sprang up onto the machine, fell into its curved saddle, which he had designed as a soft bed, for he could not know in advance how long a journey in time would last, measured in subjective time, and then he pulled a string attached to the time lever, and pulled again, and the third time, as the crystals fell into place, he felt dizzy, as if he were falling, as if he were floating, as if cotton had been wrapped around him and it were growing dark, as if night were falling and the stars hung in the sky in a clear winter's night.

Thwack! Something had hit him. Something soft, on a frame, falling on his head again a moment later. Then on his back. Ouch! Again. What was that? Since it was so dark in the machine, he pulled out a flashlight and turned it on, and in its narrow beam he saw an arm reach out of the void, a white, plump arm adorned with a diamond bracelet, holding a - yes, an umbrella - and thrashing Mork with this umbrella.

"Ouch! What are you doing!" cried the inventor, so indignant that he almost lost his glasses, which he had fastened around his head with a rubber band for all eventualities.

"Ouch!" - the umbrella crashed down on him again, as if a mighty thunderstorm were raging beyond time, and someone were trying to ward it off like this.

"Ouch!" cried the inventor, who had anticipated all sorts of incidents and disturbances, but not this one.

"Listen! What do you want from me? Have the goodness to pull your arm and this umbrella back into time!"

But as he said this, the meaning of his words began to penetrate his consciousness for the first time. An arm

reaching out of time? Beating him with an umbrella? That was impossible!

Then a weak, remote voice which seemed to come from the moon bickered: "You lecher! You seducer! You faithless creature! What have you done to my daughter? Off with you! If I ever see you and your time machine here again, it will fare ill with you. Yes indeed! My daughter is a respectable girl, and she never should have gotten involved with an inventor who cropped up out of time! Off with you!" the woman cried angrily, but still in a thin voice, "and never show your face again in our respectable time!"

That was easily said, for now the machine was beginning to pick up speed again, as it warmed up from the core of the earth, from which it drew its energy. Soon the pillows in which Mork had bedded himself began to shake, and in the outside mirrors he could see that the machine was emitting black clouds of smoke into the laboratory, which was growing increasingly ethereal, while the white arm with the umbrella was growing fatter and fatter; now a torso emerged from the darkness, at first floating in a green luminescence, as if a phantom were waiting there to thrash Mork.

"What! You crude person! You cheeky devil! You dare return to this time again! Just you wait!"

And now the umbrella descended mercilessly upon Mork from all directions; of course he tried to shield himself, but as the blows fell completely randomly and unpredictably and since - as he saw when he peered through his spread fingers, which he had raised before his glasses - they also seemed to come from different umbrellas, it was completely hopeless to attempt to gain the other shore of time without bruises.

The time machine went faster and faster, the laboratory sank in the shadow of the earth, the sun swelled

in space, and Mork felt dizzy as he was catapulted through the air; to evade the umbrella, which would beat at him with increased intensity, he grabbed at one of the levers which he had prepared for an emergency such as this, and the machine hissed as if weights were dragging at it, let out black clouds into space, glowed a little, vibrated like a racehorse pulled sharply about just before an obstacle, and materialized with such a violent jolt that not only the arm with the umbrella was swept aside, Mork was also pressed deep into the cushions and then was flung violently from the divan as the machine finally came to a halt with a terrible jolt.

For fractions of a second Mork lost consciousness. When he regained it, he felt a cool breeze, heard a mighty roaring, and water ran over him, as if he hadn't just bathed at Easter. But he was somewhat shocked to realize that he was naked, and he gasped for air, for the water rained down upon him in great streams, cool and even. But at least the umbrella did not appear again.

"Eeeew!" he heard a voice above him, and a woman who had not yet seen many winters looked down, horrified, at the man in the bathtub beneath her, as if there were a mouse there which wanted something from her.

"Eeeew! That's impossible! What are you doing in my bathtub, you monster!" she screamed, covering her breasts as if they were especially costly apples which the involuntary travelling salesman wanted to steal from her.

"Excuse me, Miss," said Mork, still down in the tub, feeling his naked bones and raising his hand protectively as if the female apparition blinded him, "this was a technical error."

"A technical error!"

The girl reached for sponge and soap and threw them at Mork's head, which flushed red; then she sprang from the

tub with a mighty leap, straight through the curtain, which tore off, and sauntered away, wagging her behind indignantly, like an insulted camel, still holding tight to her bosom so as not to lose it.

My God! Mork scratched his wet head. He hadn't imagined that his first entry into time would go so badly. This was worse than anything you could read in the relevant books, of which there were many. At the same time, however, a lustful feeling began to develop in the back of his head, for though he was miserably stranded in time, he could guess at the opportunities which awaited him if he handled his vehicle skillfully.

"What!" A cry rang out from the living room; Mork, holding his ears, heard something of the animal past of humanity, the rage of the ape and the resolution of the female defending its brood.

"What!"

But that was the voice which - though remote and weak - had belonged to that umbrella. With one leap Mork left the bathtub, tore a fluffy towel from the hook, wrapped it around his loins and danced around the bathroom, rolling his eyes desperately in the attempt to find even a glimmer of his time machine.

Indeed, a hole had appeared in the ceiling, probably a time warp which he had to thank for the fact that he had materialized in this shower. But he had no chance to enjoy the discovery, for then the bathroom doors opened, and a Valkyrie who must have been six feet tall appeared with that very umbrella in her hands, rolling her little pig's eyes, with mighty fleshy arms and a multiple chin which on its own would have sufficed to smother Mork.

Mercy! Mork wanted to cry, but he desisted. There was no point, for the machine before him went into motion, like a tank, rolling up her sleeves.

“You lecherous person, you!” cried the machine, pointing a finger at him, its nails painted purple, while she swung the umbrella over her head as if to attack, and Mork thought that all was lacking was the bugle calls of the US cavalry whom she led on to attack the Indian foes.

Then Mork, recalling an old ruse of war, stared at the door with such horror that the woman grew uncertain for a second, let the umbrella fall, stared where something horrible was supposedly happening, and as the deceived woman swung around again, Mork slipped past her into the corridor. She grabbed at him, but all she caught was the towel, which she tore off with an angry groan.

Mork, his thoughts racing behind his naked brow, looked around in the corridor fearfully. Where should he turn? He glanced quickly, desperately into the living room; the Valkyrie swung about after him and let out cries such as Mork had never heard before. There he saw the girl, who held tight to her bosom, trembling, and stared him straight in the eyes. Despite how quickly this all happened, it seemed to Mork that she recognized him, though he had no idea where to place her.

Indeed, as a mighty blow struck him from behind, it seemed to him as if a remnant of good will swam in the girl’s gaze, as if she liked him from earlier, but was still indignant at his behavior and would at least demand of him that he go on his knees and apologize - but for what? Mork thought in this haste. What had happened? What ardent bond had been fastened between the two to give occasion to such behavior?

He was rescued by the door to the bedroom, as it turned out; he slammed it shut, almost in the face of the Valkyrie, turning the key in the lock with flying fingers. Then, first heaving a sigh, for he was safe for the time being, he

leaned his back against the door and wiped the sweat from his brow.

On the left stood a big bed, which he might have liked, with rabbits on it, stuffed rabbits holding chronometers in their paws. Fancy that! A silk curtain shimmered before the window, glowing in a blue light like that which accompanies time travel. The air was in motion, and the mighty wardrobe wavered as if a waterfall were descending before it.

That was why Mork - as heavy blows beat against the door - barely noticed at first as the mirrored doors of the large wardrobe moved, then opened with a jerk. Out stepped a figure which was also naked and looking around, harried; without noticing Mork, it crossed the bedroom and vanished through the opposite wall as if it were made of cotton.

But this moment was enough for Mork, still leaning against the door, to see that the man who had crossed the room resembled him like a twin in figure and stature and even in the details of his face, which he had glimpsed from the side for a fleeting moment; indeed, Mork felt as if he had seen himself in the midst of a madcap flight, and though the man had already left the room, he wanted to call after him to wait, but then another blow struck him in the back, through the buckling door, and Mork realized the danger he was in.

If that man, his twin brother, has come out of the wardrobe, there must be a way into it, a way which might rescue Mork. Mork let out a cry as the door behind him almost tore from its frame, and he made a leap which took him across the room to the wardrobe, jumping into it just as the door over there burst open and the Valkyrie appeared with a bright red face, still holding the umbrella in her fat hands.

My goodness, Mork would have even leaped into a deep well. Mork would have swung himself out the window. He would have done God knows what to escape this terrible beast which raged there, even - it seemed to him - letting off clouds of smoke. Thus he leaped without thinking into the clothes which still moved before him as if in a cool breath of air, among big festive evening gowns which must have been made for the girl, but also suits in which, in these fractions of a second, he thought he recognized his own taste, yes, there was even the checkered bow tie lying on top, the one he loved to wear when he went to an official reception with a female acquaintance.

Then, as he glided through the clothes, one last cry resounded behind him, almost robbing him of consciousness. Then he felt soft, silky, blurry hands which reached for him, someone or something placed a wet kiss on his left cheek, making him cry out, and he tore away from these hands which attempted to hold him against the back wall of the wardrobe, and then he left the closet behind; the wall was unable to contain him, and he did not even feel it.

“Ah!” cried a rough voice from deep in the throat, and in the twilight which Mork now entered, in which the lights on the ceiling flickered as if an approaching thunderstorm were interfering with the power, a burly man with angular features, red cheeks and a red nose stood before him, apparently no less surprised than Mork.

“There you are again! That’s what I thought,” the man cried again, “there’s no counting on technology! Come over here, my dear Gustav!”

Mork, conscious with painful vividness of his nudity, trembled as he saw a muzzle-loader with attached powder pan in the man’s hand, now aiming at him, and a rapier on the wall and crossed sables hanging over a fuming fireplace.

He felt dizzy at the sight, especially since he had no idea which time he was in now, and the electric light on the ceiling did not go with the other ingredients. For a moment he licked his dry lips and wondered how this burly man could know his first name.

But he had little time to think; the hairs rose on the nape of his neck as he heard a distant, fervent voice in the wall behind him which he had just passed through, and when he turned on his naked heel for a second, he could even see the flowered wallpaper on the wall bulging out as if heavy blows were falling on it from outside this room - and in these moments Mork thanked God that the wall was sturdy.

Thus, keeping his eyes open for a way out and weighing his chances, Mork went forward, determined to explore this new terrain first of all. Some connection created by the time machine must have led here, and there must be some path which ended here, leading out of this dimension.

He stopped in the middle of the room, hearing sobbing from the next room through the open door, a female voice which reminded him remotely of a voice he might have heard at some point, but for the life of him he had no idea where to place it.

"Calm down, Babsa," said the burly man, "this time we'll take care of the affair legally."

And Babsa, in the next room, only sobbed more violently when she heard this, immediately increasing the tingling of the hairs on Mork's nape.

"He doesn't love me," said Babsa, interrupting her sobs for a moment, "he doesn't love me. He's faithless. I don't want a man like that."

"No, Babsa," said the burly man, still aiming the muzzle-loader at Mork. "He took away your honor. Now he should legalize you."

Terrible. On the table in the corner, right under the crossed swords, stood a five-armed candelabra illuminating the papers which were spread out there haphazardly.

“Over here,” said the burly man, waving the barrel, still pointed straight at Mork.

“Yes, that’s the way,” said the burly man, “we’ll have that settled in just a minute. Do you see these papers here, my dear son-in-law. You should be able to read your own writing. Right?” And as Mork nodded: “Then pick up the first sheet, you can skim through it, it’s a marriage proposal which binds you in space and time.”

So, because he had no idea how to escape the embarrassing situation, Mork obediently took one of the sheets, which were made of parchment and pigskin, with a burgundy border and a seal with a cord which looked like a noose he ought to slip over his neck, for try as he would, he could not guess what it would mean if he signed these papers.

He skimmed the text, in which he was supposed to commit himself not to marry anyone else, no matter from what time, no matter from what space, and no one from the past either. The number of children he was supposed to beget was also stipulated - by the time he came to this point he was already bathed in sweat, thinking of the heavy labor which was to be required of him, and he thought with a thin chuckle that they must be expecting him to become the forefather of an entire planet.

“I would like,” said Mork in a firm voice, putting down the papers, “to have another look at Babsa. I also think she owes me a kiss before I sign papers of such import.”

“Fine,” said the burly man, more or less satisfied, his face brightening, though his little eyes, reminiscent of a pig, were still full of mistrust.

“Babsa!” he called, “come over and wipe your face off so that Gustav doesn’t get any wrong ideas about you.”

The sobbing which had started up again in the intervals when Mork was studying the documents broke off entirely. Babsa seemed to be happy about the announcement.

It took quite a while for her to get herself ready, which of course was convenient for Mork, grateful for every breather in this game of time, until finally the burly man, growing angry again, called over:

“Come on already, we don’t want to wait forever! We have to fix your wedding date too. The festivities must be arranged - think about who you want to invite!”

Then Babsa finally appeared on the threshold, and at each movement the powder which she had applied so thickly flew over her shoulders, and the perfume with which she had doused herself sprayed about her as if it were raining on the threshold. Mork, rising to his feet, had to look up at her, and he wondered if Babsa were walking on stilts, but that was not the case. He had nothing against large women, but he was of the opinion that certain mental and physical aspects ought to correspond, and that there was enough choice as far as clothing sizes were concerned.

He almost had a heart attack when Babsa moved toward him with shuffling steps and outstretched hands, and he said with great presence of mind:

“One moment,” and he covered his nakedness with a document, “I’d like to at least put something on!”

“What,” said Babsa in a voice which vibrated in Mork’s marrow, “You’re not dressed?”

“No,” replied Mork, full of consternation, for he had thought that she could see that, his stately body, his splendid muscles, his athletic build...

“One moment,” said Babsa, “let me get my lorgnette...”

But in this moment, just as both retreated hastily to put themselves in the appropriate state of mind, a flash of lightning illuminated the room, not from the muzzle-loader, which Mork had feared might go off by accident, but from the ceiling, through which it rained and on which clouds had formed.

Then there was another flash of lightning, and a terrible thunderclap filled the room, making the swords fall from the walls, and the document, which Mork had kept to cover himself, caught fire and began to burn merrily, which the burly man did not notice, however; after the third lightning flash and the following roll of thunder which resounded from wall to wall, he had fallen on his behind and dropped the gun, from whose pan the powder sprayed up.

In the next room, Babsa cried out, for a shower of rain fell from the ceiling, single drops blowing into the adjoining room as well. Then there was an electric discharge so violent that it blew out the fire in the open fireplace, and in the darkness which now descended Mork stood in a sulphurous glow which played about him and made his hair look like a halo in the lurid light.

“Hey, hallo!” a cry came from above, from the ceiling, where a hole had opened up, a hollow voice which, like the previous voices, came from far away.

“Hey, hallo!” again, “is anyone there? Mork, the inventor?”

Mork, sensing his chance, his rescue, summoned all his courage, lifted the document to his lips, rolling it into a funnel, and cried through the amplifying funnel:

“Yes, I’m here!”

“Reach out your hand!” came the cry from above.

And Mork, quickly pushing the table under the hole in the ceiling, climbed onto it - just as the burly man scrambled to his feet and reached for the gun - and reached up his hand, where a sinewy fist reached out toward him out of the hole in which a sulphurous fire burned.

“Hallo!” cried the burly man, loading his weapon with trembling fingers.

“Come on!” cried the voice from above, where Mork’s hand had been seized.

“Hallo!” cried the burly man again, but in this moment Mork was pulled up with steely resoluteness, and he felt the things vanish about him; the world lost its substance, everything fell away beneath him as if he were moving away from a miniature world; everything lost its meaning down there while he himself floated away into the sulphurous regions, further and further and higher and higher. He was still naked, and caught cold, sneezing, for at the moment it was still raining quite heavily in these uncertain spheres.

Then the rain was over, suddenly and without transition, but in the room into which the powerful hand pulled Mork was not lit by the sun; instead, candles burned in silver holders, flickering and twisting in the draft which came from the hole.

Mork, still dizzy from the trials he had gone through, looked down at a gathering of elegant ladies and gentlemen, dressed in tuxedos, dinner jackets, cutaways, the ladies in evening dresses, long robes, little baskets in their hair and over their breasts, sitting around a long table which was richly decked with food. It seemed as the ladies and gentlemen had only waited until now to begin at last.

The man who had pulled him up sprang from the table, which had sagged under his weight, and hurried out to fetch a bowler hat; he returned a moment later and Mork,

still blinking in the attempt to accustom himself to the uncertain and surprising light, held it before his nakedness. Mork, the first flasher of the dawning Victorian epoch.

The silence which now descended after the great murmur which had dominated the table was interrupted by a shot which came from below, but far away, and a bullet flew through the table almost in slow motion, tearing the tablecloth, shattering a soup tureen, mangling one of the long white candles and burying itself in the wood-paneled ceiling, finally sticking there like a big round nut.

“That’s going too far!” said one of the fine ladies, in a blue evening dress, sitting near the bride.

But, as Mork noticed now that his eyes had accustomed themselves to the twilight, the white-draped chair next to the bride, reminiscent of a prince’s throne, was empty; his eyes lingered on the bride, however, as if he knew her. Yes, that was another one of those premonitions which sometimes came over him, and his heart skipped a beat, and he did not know whether it was out of pride, or joy, or because a terrible thought was dawning on him.

And the bride, as if to second her mother’s words, said: “Gustav, my dear. You’re making it impossible for us in your apparel.”

And the gentleman with the silver hair and the monocle, who sat next to the mother of the bride and was surely her husband - and with whom Mork had already drunk a glass or two of good things before? - sprang to his feet with a flushed face, as a second, much weaker shot resounded below, the bullet not even reaching the hall, and said in a deep voice:

“Young man, be grateful for our hospitality. We took you in like a son, for like you we were of the opinion that in the dawning industrial age it could not hurt to have an

inventor in our midst. But you are really making fools of us in that attire. I must ask you to depart and cover yourself.”

And an elderly man in a stiff collar and with waxed hair, sitting at the very end, said in a thin, strained voice: “Yes, the Huns! We shouldn’t have let him fool us with his charm and his supposed abilities.”

“But why supposed abilities,” said the woman at his side, “after all, he has just given us several proofs of his skill. And is this appearance out of the void, in which the good Frederick has assisted him, a trifle?”

“At any rate,” retorted the father of the bride, “it is not proper to simply run away from one’s own wedding and then, as if nothing had happened, crop up again through the table a few minutes later, without any clothing, without any decency, without any manners. Nothing like that has ever been heard of in the whole chronicle of the McClegglins.”

Mork sneezed again, and now he finally took the bowler from Frederick’s hand to cover himself, while an elderly lady, probably a rich cousin, tipped from her chair. But Mork also felt uncertain, then dizzy; the bride gave him a most loving look, and truly, it was quite surprising - she could quite well appeal to him: her charming little nose, the little bows in her hair, the dark gaze, the intelligent eyes, but he also noticed the energetic will which suffused her entire being...

So, after gulping down two or three swallows of wine, for he was thirsty, he climbed down from the table, but then his legs gave way. It had been too much after all. A remote shot resounded through the hall, and it seemed to Mork as if he glimpsed the outlines of the time machine in the wall; at the same time the world went dark around him, which could have been due to the wine which he had downed too quickly - it was impossible to tell.

At any rate, as the bride rushed up he fell sighing into her arms, and could not have found a better place to faint; now a warm heart beat against his chest, and, the last thing he noticed, her dress slipped, but then nothing appeared in his mind but the stars, and then it grew dark.

In bed her hair was fragrant as if of a perfume he knew, a fragrance without compare. He sniffed, he smelled, and before he opened his eyes he groped toward the other side of the bed, where his hand rested on something warm and soft.

He groped onward and grasped a rather pointy bone and a pair of underpants which, as he unconsciously noticed, could almost have come from his own time. She - he had forgotten her name - groaned and belched a bit at his side. Fancy that!

He was indignant that his wedding night, which had only been interrupted by an unfortunate incident, should not be carried on in appropriate fashion. She went on groaning, but in a deep, hollow voice which he knew from somewhere.

Often the most difficult thing is to get along with oneself. But Mork was unable to think that far. The other stirred at his side, threw back the covers in the same moment as Mork himself. Snorted in surprise, shook a few drops out of his ears and said:

“Christine?”

“Christine!” cried Mork in a tone of the most profound indignation: “Christine! Don’t make me laugh!”

“What?” said the other, no longer groaning, and turned on the light with one hand.

It was Mork, as if a mirror had been held up before his eyes. Only the other seemed a little bit older and had a few more grey hairs on his head.

“What?” growled the other Gustav. “What are you doing in my bed? And where is Christine? We got married

yesterday. Finally I found the right woman!”

“Oh, I see,” said Mork, “after examining several others, so that I could then cope with them, and even with Christine you weren’t sure.”

The other seemed to take him in for the first time: “But that’s...”

“What is what?”

“That’s a time loop,” the other explained. “I’m positive of it. Something’s gone wrong. Wait a moment.” From his pants, which lay next to the bed, he extracted a compass, a calculator and a tachograph, which time machines must have in case they crash, and began to type skillfully on these instruments: “There we have it,” he cried in a triumphant voice, “a loop in quadrant seven hundred slash 15, under the quadruple.”

“In quadrant...?”

“Yes,” the other interrupted, “that’s in the house of the Frulenz, wait a minute,” he went on typing, “the time mountains collapsed just above the apartment, no, just above the bathtub.”

“Now listen up,” said Mork, getting up with a violent movement, “I’m tired of wandering around in your footsteps. One of us is superfluous here. I suggest you disappear. You could go to the burly baron with the muzzle-loader,” he said cunningly. “He has a charming daughter.”

“Yes, Baron Igenstein,” growled the other.

Then he set the instruments aside.

“But, damn it,” he snorted, “I hope you realize that we’re in a damn hairy situation. What never should have happened has happened. You know as well as I do that the time strands must never be allowed to cross. When programming the time machine you must make sure that no continuous loops or even chance points of contact arise. The

consequences are devastating, as we know from the quasi time history books.”

“I’m quite aware of that, even if I haven’t knocked about in time as much as you have,” said Mork in a somewhat strained voice, “so I suggest you vanish.”

“But even if I wanted to,” the other replied, “how should I?”

“I’ll leave that to your inventiveness. You’ve already gotten all kinds of things going, as can be seen. You’ll find a way out of this too.”

“Yes, damn it,” growled the other, “do you hear, they’re coming.”

And indeed there was movement in the corridor outside and in the adjoining rooms. Excitedly whispering voices could be heard, and now and then the bass which Mork knew from the evening before. Then there came a knock at the door.

“And how is our inventor doing?” asked that deep voice.

“Just fine,” the two said as if from one throat.

For a moment it was quiet outside.

Then the same voice cried: “Jupiter! I’ll be blowed! That sounds as if they’re talking in chorus in there.”

The door was flung upon with a violent jerk, and a bright ray of light broke into the bedroom in which Mork had been lodged. The father of the bride stood there, trembling all over at the sight of the double Morkian apparition. The veins swelled on his brow. It took quite a while for him to get a hold on himself.

Then he cried: “That’s quite enough, Mr. Inventor! I have enough of your tricks! I request that you both vanish immediately. I will leave the direction to your discretion! But please don’t show your face again in this epoch!”

“Give us a few minutes,” said Mork to the father of the bride, “and I promise you that we’ll get rid of the loops which have cropped up in time.”

“Fine,” said old McClegglin, disappearing through the door, after casting a grim look at the bed.

“Do you know where the time machine is?” Mork asked his older brother.

He nodded.

“And do you think that we can drag ourselves back with it?”

Again the elder Mork nodded and, for he must have caught what was going around, sneezed. But he seemed reluctant, hardly ready to travel, and not happy to leave this time level.

“What’s wrong?” urged Mork. “What are you waiting for?”

“There’s one catch in the whole business,” said the elder inventor.

“Do you have more brides in the time levels?” asked Mork indignantly, forgetting that it was he who had plotted out this path and enjoyed his privileges as well.

“That’s not it,” the other replied. “But you know that the machine works serially, not parallel.”

“Serially, not parallel,” said Mork the Younger, still a bit dazed; the thoughts refused to converge in his head.

“Yes, serially. You know. You can’t travel on as many parallel tracks as you want, you can work them off only one after the other. That’s true when you’re going backwards too.”

“So if we were to go further into this time - or at least, first you and then I - then the door to all times would be open.”

“Yes, but if we want to visit our original time, that is, when returning, we must follow the paths which we have

laid, however coincidentally. The pattern of the time is already fixed.”

“That means,” Mork said hesitantly, “that we must go back the same way we came?”

“Exactly,” his more experienced brother confirmed. “I’ve gone this way already, for you have probably wondered why I am here. Why we met in this bed. That is the reason. I had to meet myself.”

There was a pounding at the door: “Gentlemen! We will not wait any longer. If you don’t disappear, we will call the police.”

“Yes, one more moment, please.”

But just as they had gotten dressed, looking rather ridiculous in the motley suits, the doors to the veranda opened, and Christine, still dressed in her nightgown, slipped through the billowing curtain. She was radiant with beauty and seemed as if she had bathed in time, in an immeasurable spring which made her young.

“Shhh!” - she laid a slender finger to her little mouth: “Don’t tell anyone I’m here.”

“What do you want?” they both asked, Mork with more pangs in his heart than his brother.

“What do I want? Aren’t I your legal wife? I want to come with you!”

“But you can’t. The fractures. We had not counted on there being such a disruption of the time fabric.”

“It’s prohibited,” said the elder of the two, taking the words out of Mork’s mouth, “as I didn’t find out until I had already set out, to take time trips for one’s own advantage. They are only permitted for research purposes.”

“Pah, I’m not a guinea pig,” Christine said defiantly, putting her hands on her hips. “I want to come with you. I’m staying with you.”

“But who would you prefer?” both of them asked again as if with one mouth.

She pouted; outside there was a pounding at the door. “In case of doubt, you both belong to me.”

“Ha,” they said again as if with one tongue, “you figured that out nicely!”

“I’ll give you one more minute,” McClegglin bellowed outside, “and if you’re not gone by then, you’ll get a good thrashing.”

“Well?” asked Christine.

“Well,” murmured the younger Mork, bit his lips, shook a few droplets out of his ears and twirled his moustache.

“Well,” said the elder, taking his glasses off to polish them.

“By the way,” said the younger Mork to his older brother, “I can’t remember whether the spot checks I made showed that we appeared double in my time.”

“Yes, that’s true,” the other confirmed. “I have never suffered a second Mork beside me.”

“So the matter is clear,” said the younger.

“Why clear?” asked Christine wide-eyed.

“Well,” said the elder, “that only one can get through with you.”

“And the other?” Christine wanted to know.

Both shrugged.

“You go first,” the younger Mork said resolutely to his elder brother, “since you know your way around here best.”

The older Mork, a sly look in his eyes, punched something into his transmitter and murmured a few words, and as the time opened with a creak and McClegglin appeared, flanked by two constables, time grew fleeting, and it was as if they were in a forest fragrant of lilac and elderflower, making even the old McClegglin sneeze. The wall of the bedroom became transparent. They gazed

outside for a moment, into a splendid spring, then, almost without transition, at the moon, which floated in the sky as a pale, silken form, hosts of heavy black birds flying before it.

Then the fabric of time grew firmer, and the feeling of dizziness which had come over the three travelers as well as the three pursuers gave way to the sensation felt by sailors when their feet touch solid ground. The tear in the continuum was over, and as if by a miracle, while the older inventor still typed at his instruments, the machine was suddenly standing in the garden, visible through the superstructure, glittering slightly, steaming slightly and ejecting, for it was still intact, a mighty black cloud of smoke.

“Come back, Christine!” bellowed old McClegglin. “You’re too young for a trip like that!”

But then they were already down in the garden and, what with the practice Mork had had, a moment later they were in the saddle and on the divan.

“It’s too late, father,” cried Christine, waving with a silken cloth; one Mork held her by the waist so that she would not fall overboard, while the other was busy at the instruments.

The machine crackled and wobbled and blew black clouds into the garden, so that old McClegglin and the two constables could barely recognize themselves, and then flames shot from the rear, and all three on board took fright as storms rose, tossing them back and forth beneath clouds which seethed past quickly, and then rain fell in fingersbreadths over the cockpit, which they had hastily shut, and lightning flashed through the darkness which had suddenly descended, and thunder tore the sulphurous stillness of time with a resounding crash.

It was so dark that Mork the younger, who had reached for Christine despite everything, found his older

brother - before realizing his error due to the slap in the face which the other gave him - planting a hot, smacking kiss on her neck. But it was due to this prolonged darkness that one of them pulled the lever which was only meant for emergencies, and what had to happen, happened.

They descended slowly over Igenstein Castle. A cloud of dust surrounded them and the machine as if they had taken down the whole sky with them, and for a moment the castle seemed to be burning, and the sturdy walls swayed, and electric discharges, more powerful and terrifying than the earlier ones, flashed about the walls, so that even Babsa could see in the dark, even without her lorgnette.

The Baron, who lay in bed dead drunk, thinking about marrying again, was woken by the sudden noise from Babsa's room, and as she was dear to him above all else, he thought a moment and seized a breech-loader instead of the muzzle-loader, and also a hunting knife with which he had recently gutted a deer, and shook a few droplets from his ear, without knowing why. With an old Igenstein battle song he stormed down the stairs and into Babsa's room; as soon as he opened the door a cloud of smoke and dust such as he had never seen before billowed out at him, blinding him completely.

Babsa, who had fallen out of her bed with sheer fright, flailed about in blind panic and laid her hands on none other than the elder Mork, who had actually meant to hold onto Christine. When the younger Mork saw this, and also saw how the two wrestled with each other, struggled, caressed each other, it seemed to him, he dragged Christine back into the machine, from which all three of them had fallen into Babsa's bed, and pulled down the Plexiglas cover before the elder Mork, not to mention the Baron, who was wiping his watering eyes, could come near.

First the Baron, whose nerves had suffered in the past weeks, cried out incomprehensible but happy words. But when he had fought his way through the fog and the dust and saw whom Babsa had buried below her, he became quite conciliatory and said, as the blue light of the vanishing time machine faded:

“Dear Gustav” - he put away hunting knife and breech-loader - “I knew you would come back. Welcome to my castle! You can forget the contract. Now that you are here of your own free will, we don’t need any documents.”

Mork the Elder, reaching vainly for the instruments which were otherwise at his disposal, quickly grasped that he was now stuck in this time once and for all, unless his younger brother should see fit to extricate him, which was hardly likely, as he well knew.

Then, as the veils rose, he estimated the Baron’s fortune, calculated according to the Gotha, and considered that there were worse things than being stranded in time. At any rate he would inherit a noble title, his sons would be Margraves or the like, and anyway Babsa and the old man would not be able to hold onto him all the time - when he went hunting and took one or the other path to the pleasure palace which lay behind the forest.

And so after a few seconds, since he had no other choice, he was quite satisfied, which shows that he was capable of switching rapidly, thinking rapidly, and reconciling himself to things which could not be changed. And as he sent quite a regretful curse after his brother and Christine, he folded Babsa - who was delighted by his change of heart - in his arms, spreading his fingers half a meter from her face without her noticing his gesture; she thanked him for the flowers which he had rescued for her from the smoke and the fog with a sucking, smacking kiss.