**Obituary**

Isaac Asimov

My husband, Lancelot, always reads the paper at breakfast. What I see of him when he first appears is his lean, abstracted face, carrying its perpetual look of angry and slightly puzzled frustration. He doesn’t greet me, and the newspaper, carefully unfolded in readiness for him, goes up before his face.

Thereafter, there is only his arm, emerging from behind the paper for a second cup of coffee into which I have carefully placed the necessary level teaspoonful of sugar— neither heaping nor deficient under pain of a stinging glare.

I am no longer sorry for this. It makes for a quiet meal, at least.

However, on this morning the quiet was broken when Lancelot barked out abruptly, “Good Lord! That fool Paul Farber is dead. Stroke!”

I just barely recognized the name. Lancelot had mentioned him on occasion, so I knew him as a colleague, as another theoretical physicist. From my husband’s exasperated epithet, I felt reasonably sure he was a moderately famous one who had achieved the success that had eluded Lancelot.

He put down the paper and stared at me angrily. “Why do they fill obituaries with such lying trash?” he demanded. They make him out to be a second Einstein for no better reason than that he died of a stroke.”

If there was one subject I had learned to avoid, it was that of obituaries. I dared not even nod agreement.

He threw down the paper and walked away and out the room, leaving his eggs half-finished and his second cup of coffee untouched.

I sighed. What else could I do? What else could I ever do?

Of course, my husband’s name isn’t really Lancelot Stebbins, because I am changing names and circumstances, as far as I can, to protect the guilty. However, the point is that even if I used real names you would not recognize my husband.

Lancelot had a talent in that respect—a talent for being passed over, for going unnoticed. His discoveries are invari ably anticipated, or blurred by the presence of a greater made simultaneously. At scientific conventions his papers are poorly attended because another paper of greater importance is being given in another section.

Naturally this has had its effect on him. It changed him.

When I first married him, twenty-five years ago, he was a sparkling catch. He was well-to-do through inheritance and already a trained physicist with an intense ambition and great promise. As for myself, I believe myself to have been pretty then, but that didn’t last. What did last was my introversion and my failure to be the kind of social success an ambitious young faculty member needs for a wife.

Perhaps that was part of Lancelot’s talent for going unnoticed. Had he married another kind of wife, she might have made him visible in her radiation.

Did he realize that himself after a while? Was that why he grew away from me after the first two or three reasonably happy years? Sometimes I believed this and bitterly blamed myself.

But then I would think it was only his thirst for fame, which grew for being unslaked. He left his position on the faculty and built a laboratory of his own far outside town, for the sake, he said, of cheap land and of isolation.

Money was no problem. In his field, the government was generous with its grants and those he could always get. On top of that, he used our own money without limit.

I tried to withstand him. I said, “But it’s not necessary, Lancelot. It’s not as though we have financial worries. It’s not as though they’re not willing to let you remain on the university staff. All I want are children and a normal life.”

But there was a burning inside him that blinded him to everything else. He turned angrily on me. “There is something that must come first. The world of science must recognize me for what I am, for a—a—great investigator.”

At that time, he still hesitated to apply the term genius to himself.

It didn’t help. The fall of chance remained always and perpetually against him. His laboratory hummed with work; he hired assistants at excellent salaries; he drove himself roughly and pitilessly. Nothing came of it.

I kept hoping he would give up someday; return to the city; allow us to lead a normal, quiet life. I waited, but always when he might have admitted defeat, some new battle would be taken up, some new attempt to storm the bastions of fame. Each time he charged with such hope and fell back in such despair.

And always he turned on me; for if he was ground down by the world, he could always grind me in return. I am not a brave person, but I was coming to believe I must leave him.

And yet...

In this last year he had obviously been girding himself for another battle. A last one, I thought. There was something about him more intense, more a-quiver than I had ever seen before. There was the way he murmured to himself and laughed briefly at nothing. There were the times he went for days without food and nights without sleep. He even took to keeping laboratory notebooks in a bedroom safe as though he feared even his own assistants.

Of course I was fatalistically certain that this attempt of his would fail also. But surely, if it failed, then at his age, he would have to recognize that his last chance had gone. Surely he would have to give up.

So I decided to wait, as patiently as I could.

But the affair of the obituary at breakfast came as something of a jolt. Once, on an earlier occasion of the sort, I had remarked that at least he could count on a certain amount of recognition in his own obituary.

I suppose it wasn’t a very clever remark, but then my remarks never are. I had meant it to be lighthearted, to pull him out of a gathering depression during which I knew, from experience, he would be most intolerable.

And perhaps there had been a little unconscious spite in. it, too. I cannot honestly say.

At any rate, he turned full on me. His lean body shook and his dark eyebrows pulled down over his deep-set eyes as he shrieked at me in falsetto, “But I’ll never read my obituary. I’ll be deprived even of that.”

And he spat at me. He deliberately spat at me.

I ran to my bedroom.

He never apologized, but after a few days in which I avoided him completely, we carried on our frigid life as before. Neither of us ever referred to the incident.

ere was another obituary.

Somehow, as I sat there alone at the breakfast table, I felt it to be the last straw for him, the climax of his long-drawn-out failure.

I could sense a crisis coming and didn’t know whether to fear or welcome it. Perhaps, on the whole, I would welcome it. Any change could not fail to be a change for the better.

Shortly before lunch, he came upon me in the living room, where a basket of unimportant sewing gave my hands something to do and a bit of television occupied my mind.

He said abruptly, “I will need your help.”

It had been twenty years or more since he had said anything like that and involuntarily I thawed toward him. He looked unhealthily excited. There was a flush on his ordinarily pale cheeks.

I said, “Gladly, if there’s something I can do for you.”

There is. I have given my assistants a month’s vacation. They will leave Saturday and after that you and I will work alone in the laboratory. I tell you now so that you will refrain from making any other arrangements for the coming week.”

I shriveled a bit. “But Lancelot, you know I can’t help you with your work. I don’t understand——”

“I know that,” he said with complete contempt, “but you don’t have to understand my work. You need only follow a few simple instructions and follow them carefully. The point is that I have discovered something, finally, which will put me where I belong——”

“Oh, Lancelot,” I said involuntarily, for I had heard this before a number of times.

“Listen to me, you fool, and for once try to behave like an adult. This time I have done it. No one can anticipate me this time because my discovery is based on such an unorthodox concept that no physicist alive, except me, is genius enough to think of it, not for a generation at least. And when my work bursts on the world. I could be recognized as the greatest name of all time in science.”

“I’m sure I’m very glad for you, Lancelot.”

“I said I could be recognized. I could not be, also. There is a great deal of injustice in the assignment of scientific credit. I’ve learned that often enough. So it will not be enough merely to announce the discovery. If I do, everyone will crowd into the field and after a while I’ll just be a name in the history books, with glory spread out over a number of Johnny-come-latelies.”

I think the only reason he was talking to me then, three days before he could get to work on whatever it was he planned to do, was that he could no longer contain himself. He bubbled over and I was the only one who was nonentity enough to be witness to that.

He said, “I intend my discovery to be so dramatized, to break on mankind with so thunderous a clap, that there will be no room for anyone else to be mentioned in the same breath with me, ever.”

He was going too far, and I was afraid of the effect of another disappointment on him. Might it not drive him mad ? I said, “But Lancelot, why need we bother ? Why don’t we leave all this ? Why not take a long vacation ? You have worked hard enough and long enough, Lancelot. Perhaps we can take a trip to Europe. I’ve always wanted to——”

He stamped his foot. “Will you stop your foolish meowing ? Saturday, you will come into my laboratory with me.”

I slept poorly for the next three nights. He had never been quite like this before, I thought, never quite as bad. Might he not be mad already, perhaps ?

It could be madness now, I thought, a madness born of disappointment no longer endurable, and sparked by the obituary. He had sent away his assistants and now he wanted me in the laboratory. He had never allowed me there before. Surely he meant to do something to me, to make me the subject of some insane experiment, or to kill me outright.

During the miserable, frightened nights I would plan to call the police, to run away, to—to do anything.

But then morning would come and I would think surely he wasn’t mad, surely he wouldn’t offer me violence. Even the spitting incident was not truly violent and he had never actuary tried to hurt me physically.

So in the end I waited and on Saturday I walked to what might be my death as meekly as a chicken. Together, silently, we walked down the path that led from our dwelling to the laboratory.

The laboratory was frightening just in itself, and I stepped about gingerly, but Lancelot only said, “Oh, stop staring about you as though something were going to hurt you. You just do as I say and look where I tell you.”

“Yes, Lancelot.” He had led me into a small room, the door of which had been padlocked. It was almost choked with objects of very strange appearance and with a great deal of wiring.

Lancelot said, “To begin with, do you see this iron crucible?”

“Yes, Lancelot.” It was a small but deep container made out of thick metal and rusted in spots on the outside. It was covered by a coarse wire netting.

He urged me toward it and I saw that inside it was a white mouse with its front paws up on the inner side of the crucible and its small snout at the wire netting in quivering curiosity, or perhaps in anxiety. I am afraid I jumped, for to see a mouse without expecting to is startling, at least to me.

Lancelot growled, “It won’t hurt you. Now just back against the wall and watch me.”

My fears returned most forcefully. I grew horribly certain that from somewhere a lightning bolt would shoot out and incinerate me, or some monstrous thing of metal might emerge and crush me, or—or---- I closed my eyes.

But nothing happened; to me, at least. I heard only a phfft as though a small firecracker had misfired, and Lancelot said to me, “Well?”

I opened my eyes. He was looking at me, fairly shining with pride. I stared blankly.

He said, “Here, don’t you see it, you idiot? Right here.”

A foot to one side of the crucible was a second one. I hadn’t seen him put it there.

“Do you mean this second crucible?” I asked.

“It isn’t quite a second crucible, but a duplicate of the first one. For all ordinary purposes, they are the same crucible, atom for atom. Compare them. You’ll find the rust marks identical.”

“You made the second one out of the first ?”

“Yes, but in a special way. To create matter would require a prohibitive amount of energy ordinarily. It would take the complete fission of a hundred grams of uranium to create one gram of duplicate matter, even granting perfect efficiency. The great secret I have stumbled on is that the duplication of an object at a point in future time requires very little energy if that energy is applied correctly. The essence of the feat, my—my dear, in my creating such a duplicate and bringing it back is that I have accomplished the equivalent of time travel.”

It was the measure of his triumph and happiness that he actually used an affectionate term in speaking to me.

“Isn’t that remarkable?” I said, for to tell the truth, I was impressed. “Did the mouse come too?”

I looked inside the second cubicle as I asked that and got another nasty shock. It contained a white mouse—a dead white mouse.

Lancelot turned faintly pink. That is a shortcoming. I can bring back living matter, but not as living matter. It comes back dead.”

“Oh, what a shame. Why?”

“I don’t know yet. I imagine the duplications are completely perfect on the atomic scale. Certainly there is no visible damage. Dissections show that.”

“You might ask——” I stopped myself quickly as he glanced at me. I decided I had better not suggest a collaboration of any sort, for I knew from experience that in that case the collaborator would invariably get all the credit for the discovery.

Lancelot said with sour amusement, “I have asked. A trained biologist has performed autopsies on some of my animals and found nothing. Of course, they didn’t know where the animal came from and I took care to take it back before anything would happen to give it away. Lord, even my assistants don’t know what I’ve been doing.”

“But why must you keep it so secret ?”

“Just because I can’t bring objects back alive. Some subtle molecular derangement. If I published my results, someone -eventing such derangement, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ : my basic discovery, and achieve a greater fame, because he would bring back a living man who might give information about the future.”

I saw that quite well. Nor need he say it ’might’ be done. It would be done. Inevitably. In fact, no matter what he did, he would lose the credit. I was sure of it.

“However,” he went on, more to himself than to me, “I can wait no longer. I must announce this, but in such a way that it will be indelibly and permanently associated with me. There must be a drama about it so effective that thereafter there will be no way of mentioning time travel without mentioning me no matter what other men may do in the future. I am going to prepare that drama and you will play a part in it.”

“But what do you want me to do, Lancelot?”

“You’ll be my widow.”

I clutched at his arm. “Lancelot, do you mean——” I cannot quite analyze the conflicting feelings that upset me at that moment.

He disengaged himself roughly. “Only temporarily. I am not committing suicide I am simply going to bring myself back from three days in the future.”

“But you’ll be dead then.”

“Only the "me" that is brought back. The real "me" will be as alive as ever. Like that white rat.” His eyes shifted to a dial and he said, “Ah, Zero time in a few seconds. Watch the second crucible and the dead mouse.”

Before my eyes it disappeared and there was a phfft sound again.

“Where did it go?”

“Nowhere,” said Lancelot. “It was only a duplicate. The moment we passed that instant in time at which the duplicate was formed, it naturally disappeared. It was the first mouse that was the original, and it remains alive and well. The same will be true of me. A duplicate "me" will come back dead. The original "me" will be alive. After three days, we will come to the instant at which the duplicate "me" was formed, using the real "me" as a model, and sent back dead. Once we pass that instant the dead duplicate "me" will disappear and the live "me" will remain. Is that clear?”

“It sounds dangerous.”

“It isn’t. Once my dead body appears, the doctor will pronounce me dead, the newspapers will report me dead, the undertaker will prepare to bury the dead. I will return to life and announce how I did it. When that happens, I will be more than the discoverer of time travel; I will be the man who came back from the dead. Time travel and Lancelot Stebbins will be publicized so thoroughly and so intermingled, that nothing will extricate my name from the thought of time travel ever again.”

“Lancelot,” I said softly, “why can’t we just announce your discovery? This is too elaborate a plan. A simple announcement will make you famous enough and then we can move to the city perhaps——”

“Quiet? You will do what I say.”

I don’t know how long Lancelot was thinking of all this before the obituary actually brought matters to a head. Of course, I don’t minimize his intelligence. Despite his phenomenally bad luck, there is no questioning his brilliance.

He had informed his assistants before they had left of the experiments he intended to conduct while they were gone. Once they testified it would seem quite natural that he should be bent over a particular set of reacting chemicals and that he should be dead of cyanide poisoning to all appearances.

“So you see to it that the police get in touch with my assistants at once. You know where they can be reached. I want no hint of murder or suicide, or anything but accident, natural and logical accident. I want a quick death certificate from the doctor, a quick notification to the newspapers.”

I said, “But Lancelot, what if they find the real you ?”

“Why should they?” he snapped. “If you find a corpse, do you start searching for the living replica also? No one will look for me and I will stay quietly in the temporal chamber for the interval. There are toilet facilities and I can bring in enough sandwich fixings to keep me.”

He added regretfully, “I’ll have to make do without coffee, though, till it’s over. I can’t have anyone smelling unexplained coffee here while I’m supposed to be dead. Well, there’s plenty of water and it’s only three days.”

I clasped my hands nervously and said, “Even if they do find you, won’t it be the same thing anyway? There’ll be a dead "you" and a living "you" ——” It was myself I was trying to console, myself I was trying to prepare for the inevitable disappointment.

But he turned on me, shouting, “No, it won’t be the same thing at all. It will all become a hoax that failed. I’ll be famous, but only as a fool.”

“But Lancelot,” I said cautiously, “something always goes wrong.”

“Not this time.”

“But you always say "not this time" and yet something always——”

He was white with rage and his irises showed clear all about their circle. He caught my elbow and hurt it terribly but I dared not cry out. He said, “Only one thing can go wrong and that is you. If you give it away, if you don’t play your part perfectly, if you don’t follow the instructions exactly, I—I——” He seemed to cast about for a punishment. “I’ll kill you.”

I turned my head away in sheer terror and tried to break loose, but he held on grimly. It was remarkable how strong he could be when he was in a passion. He said, “Listen to me! You have done me a great deal of harm by being you, but I have blamed myself for marrying you in the first place and for never finding the time to divorce you in the second. But now I have my chance, despite you, to turn my life into a vast success. If you spoil even that chance, I will kill you. I mean that literally.”

I was sure he did. “I’ll do everything you say,” I whispered, and he let me go.

He spent a day on his machinery. “I’ve never transported more than a hundred grams before,” he said, calmly thoughtful.

I thought: It won’t work. How can it ?

The next day he adjusted the device to the point where I needed only to close one switch. He made me practice that particular switch on a dead circuit for what seemed an interminable time.

“Do you understand now ? Do you see exactly how it is done?”

“Yes.”

Then do it, when this light flashes and not a moment before.”

It won’t work, I thought. “Yes,” I said.

He took his position and remained in stolid silence. He was wearing a rubber apron over a laboratory jacket.

The light flashed, and the practice turned out to be worth while for I pulled the switch automatically before thought could stop me or even make me waver.

For an instant there were two Lancelots before me, side by side, the new one dressed as the old one was but more rumpled. And then the new one collapsed and lay still.

“All right,” cried the living Lancelot, stepping off the carefully marked spot. “Help me. Grab his legs.”

I marveled at Lancelot. How, without wincing or showing any uneasiness, could he carry his own dead body, his own body of three days in the future. Yet he held it under its arms without showing any more emotion than if it had been a sack of wheat.

I held it by the ankles, my stomach turning at the touch. It was still blood-warm to the touch; freshly dead. Together we carried it through a corridor and up a flight of stairs, down another corridor and into a room. Lancelot had it already arranged. A solution was bubbling in a queer all-glass contraption inside a closed section, with a movable glass door partitioning it off.

Other chemical equipment was scattered about, calculated, no doubt, to show an experiment in progress. A bottle, boldly labeled ’Potassium cyanide’ was on the desk, prominent among the others. There was a small scattering of crystals on the desk near it; cyanide, I presume.

Carefully Lancelot crumpled the dead body as though it had fallen off the stool. He placed crystals on the body’s left hand and more on the rubber apron; finally, a few on the body’s chin.

“They’ll get the idea,” he muttered.

A last look-around and he said, “All right, now. Go back to the house now and call the doctor. Your story is that you came here to bring me a sandwich because I was working through lunch. There it is.” And he showed me a broken dish and a scattered sandwich where, presumably, I had dropped it. “Do a little screaming, but don’t overdo it.”

It was not difficult for me to scream when the time came, or to weep. I had felt like doing both for days and now it was a relief to let the hysteria out.

The doctor behaved precisely as Lancelot had said he would. The bottle of cyanide was virtually the first thing he saw. He frowned. “Dear me, Mrs. Stebbins, he was a careless chemist.” .

“I suppose so,” I said, sobbing. “He shouldn’t have been working himself, but both his assistants are on vacation.”

“When a man treats cyanide as though it were salt, it’s bad.” The doctor shook his head in grave moralistic fashion. “Now, Mrs. Stebbins, I will have to call the police. It’s accidental cyanide poisoning, but it’s a violent death and the police——”

“Oh, yes, yes, call them.” And then I could almost have beaten myself for having sounded suspiciously eager.

The police came, and along with them a police surgeon, who grunted in disgust at the cyanide crystals on hand, apron, and chin. The police were thoroughly disinterested, asked only statistical questions concerning names and ages. They asked if I could manage the funeral arrangements. I said yes, and they left.

I then called the newspapers, and two of the press associations. I said I thought they would be picking up news of the death from the police records and I hoped they would not stress the fact that my husband was a careless chemist, with the tone of one who hoped nothing ill would be said of the dead. After all, I went on, he was a nuclear physicist rather than a chemist and I had a feeling lately he might be in some sort of trouble.

I followed Lancelot’s line exactly in this and that also worked. A nuclear physicist in trouble? Spies? Enemy agents ?

The reporters began to come eagerly. I gave them a youthful portrait of Lancelot and a photographer took pictures of the laboratory buildings. I took them through a few rooms of the main laboratory for more pictures. No one, neither the police nor the reporters, asked questions about the bolted room or even seemed to notice it.

I gave them a mass of professional and biographical material that Lancelot had made ready for me and told several anecdotes designed to show a combination of humanity and brilliance. In everything I tried to be letter-perfect and yet I could feel no confidence. Something would go wrong; something would go wrong.

And when it did, I knew he would blame me. And this time he had promised to kill me.

The next day I brought him the newspapers. Over and over again, he read them, eyes glittering. He had made a full box on the lower left of the New York Times’ front page. The Times made little of the mystery of his death and so did the A.P., but one of the tabloids had a front-page scare headline: ATOM SAVANT IN MYSTERY DEATH.

He laughed aloud as he read that and when he completed all of them, he turned back to the first.

He looked up at me sharply. “Don’t go. Listen to what they say.”

“I’ve read them already, Lancelot.”

“Listen, I tell you.”

He read every one aloud to me, lingering on their praises of the dead, then said to me, aglow with self-satisfaction, “Do you still think something will go wrong?”

I said hesitantly, “If the police come back to ask why I thought you were in trouble ...”

“You were vague enough. Tell them you had had bad dreams. By the time they decide to push investigations further, if they do, it will be too late.”

To be sure, everything was working, but I could not hope that all would continue so. And yet the human mind is odd; it will persist in hoping even when it cannot hope.

I said, “Lancelot, when this is all over and you are famous, really famous, then after that, surely you can retire. We can go back to the city and live quietly.”

“You are an imbecile. Don’t you see that once I am recognized, I must continue? Young men will flock to me. This laboratory will become a great Institute of Temporal Investigation. I’ll become a legend in my lifetime. I will pile my greatness so high that no one afterward will ever be able to be anything but an intellectual dwarf compared to me.” He raised himself on tiptoe, eyes shining, as though he already saw the pedestal onto which he would be raised.

It had been my last hope of some personal shreds of happiness and a small one. I sighed.

I asked the undertaker that the body be allowed to remain in its coffin in the laboratories before burial in the Stebbins family plot on Long Island. I asked that it remain unembalmed, offering to keep it in a large refrigerated room with the temperature set at forty. I asked that it not be removed to the funeral home.

The undertaker brought the coffin to the laboratory in frigid disapproval. No doubt this was reflected in the eventual bill. My offered explanation that I wanted him near me for a last period of time and that I wanted his assistants to be given a chance to view the body was lame and sounded lame.

Still, Lancelot had been most specific in what I was to say.

Once the dead body was laid out, with the coffin lid still open, I went to see Lancelot.

“Lancelot,” I said, “the undertaker was quite displeased. I think he suspects that something odd is going on.”

“Good,” said Lancelot with satisfaction.

“But——”

“We need only wait one more day. Nothing will be brought to a head out of mere suspicion before then. Tomorrow morning the body will disappear, or should.”

“You mean it might not?” I knew it; I knew it.

There could be some delay, or some prematurity. I have never transported anything this heavy and I’m not certain how exactly my equations hold. To make the necessary observation is one reason I want the body here and not in a funeral parlor.”

“But in the funeral parlor it would disappear before witnesses.”

“And here you think they will suspect trickery?”

“Of course.”

He seemed amused. They will say: Why did he send his assistants away? Why did he run experiments himself that any child could perform and yet manage to kill himself running them ? Why did the dead body happen to disappear without witnesses ? They will say: There is nothing to this absurd story of time travel. He took drugs to throw himself in a cataleptic trance and doctors were hoodwinked.”

“Yes,” I said faintly. How did he come to understand all that?

“And,” he went on, “when I continue to insist I have solved time travel and that I was indisputably pronounced dead and was not indisputably alive, orthodox scientists will heatedly denounce me as a fraud. Why, in one week, I will have become a household name to every man on Earth. They will talk of nothing else. I will offer to make a demonstration of time travel before any group of scientists who wish to see it. I will offer to make the demonstration on an intercontinental TV circuit. Public pressure will force scientists to attend, and the networks to give permission. It doesn’t matter whether people will watch hoping for a miracle or for a lynching. They will watch! And then I will succeed and who in science will ever have had a more transcendent climax to his life?”

I was dazzled for a moment, but something unmoved within me said: Too long, too complicated; something will go wrong.

That evening, his assistants arrived and tried to be respectfully grieving in the presence of the corpse. Two more witness to swear they had seen Lancelot dead; two more witnesses to confuse the issue and help build events to their stratospheric peak.

By four the next morning, we were in the cold-room, bundled in overcoats and waiting for zero moment.

Lancelot, in high excitement, kept checking his instruments and doing I-know-not-what with them. His desk computer was working constantly, though how he could make his cold fingers jiggle the keys so nimbly, I am at a loss to say.

I, myself, was quite miserable. There was the cold, the dead body in the coffin, the uncertainty of the future.

We had been there for what seemed an eternity and finally Lancelot said, “It will work. It will work as predicted. At the most, disappearance will be five minutes late and this when seventy kilograms of mass are involved. My analysis of chronous forces is masterly indeed.” He smiled at me, but he also smiled at his own corpse with equal warmth.

I noticedthat his lab jacket, which he had been wearing constantly for three days now, sleeping in it I am certain, had become wrinkled and shabby. It was about as it had seemed upon the second Lancelot, the dead one, when it had appeared.

Lancelot seemed to be aware of my thoughts, or perhaps only of my gaze, for he looked down at his jacket and said, “Ah, yes, I had better put on the rubber apron. My second self was wearing it when it appeared.”

“What if you didn’t put it on ?’I asked tonelessly.

“I would have to. It would be a necessity. Something would have reminded me. Else it would not have appeared in one.” His eyes narrowed. “Do you still think something will go wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled.

“Do you think the body won’t disappear, or that I’ll disappear instead?”

When I didn’t answer at all, he said in a half-scream, “Can’t you see my luck has changed at last? Can’t you see how smoothly and according to plan it is all working out? I will be the greatest man who ever lived. Come, heat up the water for the coffee.” He was suddenly calm again. “It will serve as celebration when my double leaves us and I return to life. I haven’t had any coffee for three days.”

It was only instant coffee he pushed in my direction, but after three days that, too, would serve. I fumbled at the laboratory hot-plate with my cold fingers until Lancelot pushed me roughly to one side and set a beaker of water upon it.

“It’ll take a while,” he said, turning the control to ’high.” He looked at his watch, then at various dials on the wall. “My double will be gone before the water boils. Come here and watch.” He stepped to the side of the coffin.

I hesitated. “Come,” he said peremptorily.

I came.

He looked down at himself with infinite pleasure and waited. We both waited, staring at a corpse.

There was the phfft sound and Lancelot cried out, “Less than two minutes off.”

Without a blur or a wink, the dead body was gone.

The open coffin contained an empty set of clothes. The clothes, of course, had not been those in which the dead body had been brought back. They were real clothes and they stayed in reality. There they now were: underwear within shirt and pants; shirt within tie; tie within jacket. Shoes had turned over, dangling socks from within them. The body was gone.

I could hear water boiling.

“Coffee,” said Lancelot. “Coffee first. Then we call the police and the newspapers.”

I made the coffee for him and myself. I gave him the usual level teaspoon from the sugar bowl, neither heaping nor deficient. Even under these conditions, when I was sure for once it wouldn’t matter to him, habit was strong.

I sipped at my coffee, which I drank without cream or sugar, as was my habit. Its warmth was most welcome.

He stirred his coffee. “All,” he said softly, “all I have waited for.” He put the cup to his grimly triumphant lips and drank.

Those were his last words.

Now that it was over, there was a kind of frenzy over me. I managed to strip him and dress him in the clothing from the coffin. Somehow I was able to heave his weight upward and place him in the coffin. I folded his arms across his chest as they had been.

I then washed out every trace of coffee in the sink in the room outside, and the sugar bowl, too. Over and over again I rinsed, until all the cyanide, which I had substituted for the sugar, was gone.

I carried his laboratory jacket and other clothes to the hamper where I had stored those the double had brought back. The second set had disappeared, of course, and I put the first set there.

Next I waited.

By that evening, I was sure the corpse was cold enough, and called the undertakers. Why should they wonder ? They expected a dead body and there was the dead body. The same dead body. Really the same body. It even had cyanide in it as the first was supposed to have.

I suppose they might still be able to tell the difference between a body dead twelve hours and one dead three and half days, even under refrigeration, but why should they dream of looking?

They didn’t. They nailed down the coffin, took him away, and buried him. It was the perfect murder.

As a matter of fact, since Lancelot was legally dead at the time I killed him, I wonder if, strictly speaking, it was murder at all. Of course, I don’t intend to ask a lawyer about this.

Life is quiet for me now; peaceful and contented. I have money enough. I attend the theater. I have made friends.

And I live without remorse. To be sure, Lancelot will never receive credit for time travel. Someday when time travel is discovered again, the name of Lancelot Stebbins will rest in Stygian darkness, unrecognized. But then, I told him that whatever his plans, he would end without the credit. If I hadn’t killed him, something else would have spoiled things, and then he would have killed me.

No, I live without remorse.

In fact, I have forgiven Lancelot everything, everything but that moment when he spat at me. So it is rather ironic that he did have one happy moment before he died, for he was given a gift few could have, and he, above all men, savored it.

Despite his cry, when he spat at me, Lancelot managed to read his own obituary.