THE TIME TORNADO

At six forty-five one summer morning, a red London bus was crossing Waterloo Bridge.

A group of school children, sitting at the back, were copying each other's homework and fighting, when one of them looked out of the window, across the river to Cleopatra's Needle, and saw something very strange.

The boy elbowed his friend. The dark finger of ancient Egypt was pointing towards the sky as it always did, but today the tip of the obelisk was glowing bright red, as it had when it was new and painted and glorious, four thousand years ago, in the Temple of the Sun.

'Look,' said the boy, 'look!'

Riding the river as though it were a road was a phalanx of chariots and horsemen.

The white horses were pulled up on their haunches; the nodding ostrich plumes on their head-collars rose and fell; the fan bearers came forward, the troops stood at ease, and above the kneeling priests was the Pharaoh himself, inspecting his new monument from a burnished car.

Other people turned to stare at the mirage, and the bus

driver slowed down, though he did not quite stop; he seemed to be hovering over Time.

In the slowed-down silence no one spoke and nothing moved – except for the river, which to all observation was running backwards.

Then, from downstream, there was a sudden terrible crack, like the sky breaking. A cone of wind hit the bus, knocking it sideways over the bridge and shattering glass across the seats where the children were sitting.

The bus should have crashed down into the river, but instead the wind whirled through the punched-in windows and lifted the bus high above the bridge and out towards the obelisk.

A great wave of water swelled up against the stone piers of the bridge, battering the concrete underside with such force that part of the supporting wall was torn away.

As the tidal wave slammed back down on to the water, the river resumed its normal flow. At the same second the bus spun crazily into the line of chariots. On impact, bus, chariots and horsemen vanished, leaving nothing behind but traces of red-gold sun on the surface of the water.

Big Ben struck seven.

A few days later police found an exercise book floating on the Thames; the name printed in the front of the book identified it as belonging to one of the boys on the bus. The pages had thickened to parchment, and the writing inside was not English, but signs of long-legged birds and half-turned

figures under the eye of the great god Ra.

The bus and its passengers were never found.

It was the first of the Time Tornadoes.

THE VISITOR

At 4:30 p.m. precisely, Abel Darkwater drove his Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud through the gates of the great house called Tanglewreck.

Abel Darkwater was never late – unless he intended to be; and his watch was never wrong – unless he wanted it to be.

Some people are always short of time, but Abel Darkwater had all the time in the world – well, nearly all of it – and it was the *nearly* that was the problem, and the reason why he had come to Tanglewreck.

He steered the big car up the long ragged driveway. He glanced at the round green dials on the dashboard. The speedometer told him he was travelling at precisely 10mph. The rev counter registered 30 revs per minute. The luminous clock assured him that he was punctual, and the Age-Gauge steadied its hands at 1588, the year Tanglewreck had been built.

Abel Darkwater had invented and fitted the Age-Gauge himself. In town it computed the age of the houses. In open countryside it could calculate the date of the limestone or the shale or the clay, and he knew what dinosaurs would have roamed there once, or what desperate hunters had leaned over rain-driven ledges to drop a boulder on a boar.

The Age-Gauge worked on radioactive emissions – faint but traceable echoes of time. Abel Darkwater knew that all time is always present, but buried layer by layer under what people call Now. Today lies on top of yesterday, and yesterday lies on top of the day before, and so on down the layers of history, until the layers are so thick that the voices underneath are muffled to whispers. Abel Darkwater listened to those whispers and he understood what they said.

Now he was at Tanglewreck, and the house was telling him the beginning of its own past – the day when it was a young house new-made. When Now was Then and Then was Now. He was curious to hear more, but he had come here today on business, and he must not keep that business waiting.

He pulled up outside the black and white timbered house, and switched off the engine. The dials fell back to zero. He heaved himself slowly out of his car, and consulted his heavy gold pocket watch: the hour hand marked four. The minute hand thirty-five past the hour. The second hand moved swiftly from forty to fifty. The fourth hand, in red, like a warning, pointed towards eleven o'clock. Abel Darkwater looked up, following the direction of his watch. Sure enough, there was a face at the window. It drew back. He smiled, though you would not call such a smile pleasure or kindness, and then he raised the door-knocker in the shape of an angel.

Silver drew back from the window. She knew why he had come.

From below she could hear Mrs Rokabye bawling from the hall.

'Silver! Get down here at once, this split second of the minute.'

'Yes, Mrs Rokabye.'

Silver ran down the stairs to the closed arms of Mrs Rokabye, her mouth open like a crater, the words steaming out.

'Look at the state of you!'

Silver looked at the state of her in the big mirror in the hall. Her hair was orange and curly and it stood on end unless she plaited it. Her eyes were green. Her nose was straight. Her face was freckled and she was small. Small and untidy; it is hard to be tidy when you are doing jobs all day.

'Get down into the cellar and stoke the furnace with coal. Do you expect me to do it myself?'

'No, Mrs Rokabye.'

'No indeed! I am slaving for our future. Without ME, there will be no future!! Without me, YOU would have to go into a children's home. Would you like that?'

'No, Mrs Rokabye.'

'No indeed! When I think what I gave up to come here and look after you. Why, I gave up a whole life. It was all goodness on my part, and it has been all ingratitude on your part. Do you think I like being here?'

'No, Mrs Rokabye.'

'Great, draughty, crumbling monstrosity. I had a lovely home in Manchester with carpets and central heating and

Darts Nights with all my friends, and now I live on a windswept hill in this ruin, with YOU.'

'Yes, Mrs Rokabye.'

'Mr Darkwater – you remember him? He proved a very good friend to us after the . . . er, tragedy, accident, misfortune. We sold him the clock and some watches to pay off your father's debts.'

'Yes – he took my secret night-clock.'

'Oh, don't be such a baby – we lived on that money for a year.'

'*You* did . . .'

'What was that?'

Mrs Rokabye was looking at Silver with eyes as narrow as arrowheads. There was going to be trouble – but then there was a knocking at the door, and Mrs Rokabye smoothed her pinned-back hair and whipped out her compact to powder her nose. It was like dust settling on a rock.

'Here he is! Quick, quick, now get downstairs into the cellar and don't come out until I tell you. Bigamist will be watching.'

'Yes, Mrs Rokabye.'

My name is Silver and I have lived at Tanglewreck all of my life, which is to say, eleven years.

I live here with Mrs Rokabye: my father's sister and my legal guardian.

My parents and my older sister Buddleia disappeared in a railway accident, one Friday, four years ago, when I was seven. Then,

after it had all been written about in the newspaper, and there was talk of what to do with me, Mrs Rokabye appeared, all in black, which is normal, I suppose, after a tragedy, but then she never took off the black tragedy clothes. She always wears black, and I think her soul is black too.

My father had never talked about his sister, my aunt, but she signed all the papers and everything is legal. I'd rather live by myself, but it's not allowed.

Mrs Rokabye has a pet rabbit called Bigamist, on account of his habits. The house is full of small-scale Bigamists, so that wherever you go, there's a pair of yellow eyes watching you, and a black nose twitching, and an ear cocked at your business, and a scut just hiding under a chair as you come into a room. They're all her spies, but Bigamist is the worst. He tells her everything I do.

Today, I've been trying to sneak into the kitchen and find the cake intended for Abel Darkwater. But Bigamist is following me and I haven't got a carrot to throw him off the scent.

The cellar is black and filthy and lit by a dusty electric 25-watt bulb. We're on an economy drive here at Tanglewreck – at least the house is, and I am. Mrs Rokabye eats fish and chips and puddings and chocolate bars, and then she keeps her 100-watt bulb on all night watching television. She sleeps until eleven o'clock, and then she takes a taxi to go shopping. She comes back laden with ready-chopped carrots and fresh washed lettuce for Bigamist, and Fast Fish 'n' Chips Ahoy! for herself. And slabs of chocolate the size of rafts. Family size *it says, but as we're not a family, I don't get any of this.*

I eat soup most days, and I make it from what I grow in our vegetable garden. Tonight I'm having dandelion, nettle and cabbage. I shut my eyes when I eat it, but that doesn't make it taste any better.

Still, I tell myself, tasty or nasty, it's better than what Mrs Rokabye would give me – which is next to nothing.

'Girls should know how to cook,' she always tells me, putting her own extra-large portions of cod 'n' chips in the microwave. 'I am preparing you for life.' Then she doles out a few scraps of meat and bread, and takes her own laden tray into the library.

I started shovelling the coal and thinking about my mother and father. My father was a scientist who worked at Jodrell Bank on Alderley Edge in Cheshire. He did something with stars. My mother was a painter but she had to spend a lot of time looking after my sister Buddleia, who had a twisted leg from when she was born. My parents and Buddleia had gone to London for something important on the day that they didn't come back. I don't know what it was, but it was something to do with the Timekeeper . . .

'So you understand, Mrs Rokabye, I must have it, and I will pay you a large sum – oh yes, a very large sum to get it.'

Abel Darkwater clinked his teacup. Silver heard the cake knife hitting the plate as Mrs Rokabye sliced through the Victoria sponge.

'I will make you rich, oh yes.'

'Mr Darkwater, I have searched the house from chimney to cellar for the last four years. There is not a cobweb of this

horrible house that I have not mapped. I simply do not know where the clock or watch or whatever it is could be hidden.'

'You do not, but the child Silver must know.'

'What on earth does she know? On Mondays she is simple, on Tuesdays she is stupid, on Wednesdays she is stubborn. On Thursdays she is silly, on Fridays she is silent, on Saturdays she is SO cross, and on Sundays she is sullen. Don't you think I've quizzed her day and night since the moment I arrived?'

'Perhaps you ask the wrong questions, Mrs Rokabye.'

Silver leaned back on her shovel. The funnel of the furnace was acting like a speaking tube – or rather, a listening tube, because she could hear everything they were saying in the library. Quickly, she shovelled some more coal to keep them warm, and then she pressed herself close to the funnel. Bigamist was looking at her suspiciously but he didn't dare to come closer because of the roaring fire.

Abel Darkwater was speaking again.

'When the child's parents so strangely disappeared, her father was carrying the Timekeeper – or so everyone thought. I happen to know beyond a second of doubt that he was supposed to bring the clock to me. But the clock, like the parents, has never been found.'

Mrs Rokabye was silent for a moment. Then she said, 'It is my belief that the watch was stolen from his body and sold. It is probably in Timbuktoo.'

‘Believe me, madam,’ said Abel Darkwater, his voice dry with irritation, ‘if that watch had belonged to anyone else, anywhere in the world, these last four years, I would have known about it.’

‘I realise you are very well connected in the trade,’ said Mrs Rokabye, by way of appeasement, but this only fuelled Darkwater the more.

‘In the TRADE? You call Tempus Fugit a trade? It is a lifetime! It is many lifetimes. What began in the pyramids of Egypt is not done yet. Isaac Newton was a member of our “trade”, as you call it. I have a clock of his in my possession.’ Abel Darkwater looked up, startled. ‘What’s that rabbit doing in here?’

‘He looks after the child,’ said Mrs Rokabye, getting up. ‘Like Nana in *Peter Pan*, you know.’

‘Yes, I do know,’ said Abel Darkwater. ‘There was a crocodile in *Peter Pan*, and a clock. Very important part of the story – now get rid of that rabbit, and listen to me.’

And so Bigamist was not able to impart to Mrs Rokabye his suspicion that Silver was up to no good. He found himself dropped briskly out of the window, then Mrs Rokabye returned meekly to her chair.

In the cellar, Silver crept closer to the funnel. What on earth was Tempus Fugit? She had to try and remember the words. But now Abel Darkwater was speaking again.

‘I buy and sell watches and clocks – the rare, the valuable, the curious. There is only one watch of any interest that has never passed through my hands, and that watch is the

Timekeeper. Now answer me this question, Mrs Rokabye, and answer it well; have you ever noticed any – shall we say – disturbances in Time, here at Tanglewreck?'

'You mean, like the things I have been seeing on the television? What are they called?'

'Time Tornadoes.'

'No, nothing like that – I get up in the morning and I go to bed at night.'

(*You do not*, thought Silver, from the cellar, *you stay up all night watching old films and then you leave me to get up on my own and do the washing up*.)

'So Time here has not halted at all – even for a few moments, or seemed to be running out? Are some days shorter than others?'

'No, every day is the same length.'

(*Oh no*, *they're not*, thought Silver.)

'And have you been disturbed at all by anything, or anyone from the past?'

'Ooh, I heard about that Woolly Mammoth appearing on the River Thames – is it troo-oo-oo?'

'Yes, it is true.'

'No!'

'Yes.'

'And that people have disappeared? In London?'

'Yes, it is true, though nobody knows why.'

'I blame mobile phones.'

'Why is that, Mrs Rokabye?'

'They emit, don't they?'

'Emit what?'

'Rays – waves, whatever you call it, can't be good for you, and people are talking on them all the time – all those signals bouncing off satellites. I mean, what's going on in space? That's what I'd like to know.'

'It is true, Mrs Rokabye, that at present we are experiencing strange disruptions in the fabric of Time – once so constant and so certain. People vanish, as you say, Time stands still – temporarily – then it jerks forward far too fast. The best minds are considering it.'

'Well, thankfully it isn't happening here.'

'I am glad to hear it. It is what I expected you would say. Now listen carefully. I believe that the Timekeeper is still here in this house, although you have failed to find it for me.' Abel Darkwater held up his hand as Mrs Rokabye opened her mouth in protest. She closed her mouth. He continued. 'So now I have another plan. I would like you to bring the child to London – tell her it is a special treat. I shall provide train tickets and expenses, and you shall both stay at my house. That will give me an opportunity to question the child about the Timekeeper, and, perhaps, if you don't mind – and please take this money for your troubles – I would like also –'

At that moment there was a terrific crash as Bigamist flung himself down the cellar stairs. Silver missed whatever it was 'also' that Abel Darkwater wanted – and she wondered why he didn't just ask her his questions here and now in the house. She didn't have anything to tell him anyway. Nobody seemed to believe her, but Silver had absolutely no idea

where the Timekeeper could be. She had never even seen it.

As she swept up the last of the coal to throw on the furnace, she noticed something sparkling in the coal dust. She picked it up carefully, so that Bigamist couldn't see what she was doing. It was long and thin, like a man's tiepin, with a sharp pointed end, and it seemed to be made of diamonds. Hurriedly, she dropped it in the pocket of her overalls.

Overhead, she heard the library door open and the floorboards creak as Mrs Rokabye and Abel Darkwater went towards the front door. She sneaked up the cellar steps, past Bigamist, and darted into the library. Quick as a whistle, she stuffed the leftover ham sandwiches and Victoria sponge down her overalls, and filled her pockets with chocolate biscuits. From the window, she could see Abel Darkwater slowly lowering himself into his car. Mrs Rokabye was turning back towards the house, counting the wad of money in her hands.

Silver grabbed the jug of milk from the table, and slipped out past the enraged rabbit and upstairs to her little bedroom that she loved. It was where she felt safe.

The room was high up in the attics of the house. It had a big wooden bed carved in the shape of a swan, and a fireplace, where she always kept a fire burning, fetching sticks from the orchard, so that the room smelled of apples and pears even in the worst of winter.

Silver began to heat the milk on the little fire, and lay out the sandwiches and cake. She would save the biscuits for later.

She looked at the photograph of her mother and father

and sister on the mantelpiece, but she didn't cry. Instead she said, half to herself, and half to the photo – *Help me to find the Timekeeper*.

The room breathed in. The fire paused in its burning. The milk that had boiled to the rim of the pan bubbled and stopped. It was only the smallest hesitation in time, but Silver knew what she had to do. Something in her and something outside her leapt together and waited in the leaping. She said, *Yes, yes.*

Then the moment landed, and the milk boiled over, and everything was as it usually was, but Silver knew that she had made a promise – to something inside herself and to something outside herself. She would have to find the Timekeeper now, because the Timekeeper had to be found.