

THE UNDERSIDE

This month Bertram Chandler delves into the theme of racial memory, a subject at once both fascinating and filled with tremendous possibilities. In a way it is a pity this story is so short—it has all the ingredients for a much longer story.

BY BERTRAM CHANDLER

That's the way it happens.

You know somebody quite well, and then you drift apart and lose all touch and then, quite by chance, you meet again and it's as though the intervening years had never been.

That's the way it happened with myself and Carruthers. I hadn't seen him for years, and hadn't thought about him for almost as many years and then, one late afternoon, I found myself rubbing shoulders with him, quite literally, at a crowded bar in Pitt Street.

I stared at him in surprise—and was a little hurt to see that my amazement wasn't reflected in his face. He looked the same as he had always looked; the untidy, dark hair over the thin face was as abundant as ever, the pale eyes still the same startling contrast to his olive skin, his necktie still the be-draggled, twisted rag that it always was.

He said, before I could speak, "I was expecting this."

"I wasn't," I replied. "What are you doing in Sydney?"

"I could ask you the same," he countered, "but I won't. After all, one is liable to run into seafarers anywhere that there's salt water. I take it that you are still at sea?"

"I am. But what are *you* doing in Australia?"

"Couldn't stand the English climate," he replied. "And when old Uncle Phil—you'll remember *him*—died and left me a sizeable hunk of folding money, I decided that I might as well live where I pleased instead of being tied to a job in one of the drearier London suburbs. I haven't made up my mind yet—but I think this place will suit me."

"Got a job yet?" I asked.

"There's no need for me to look for one. Even in these days of iniquitous taxation I have enough to live on comfortably. In any case, a job would interfere with my real work."

"Your real work?" I asked. "Oh, I remember now. You were always playing around with psychic research and all the rest of it. There was that magazine you started . . . It folded, didn't it?"

"Yes. It folded. It shouldn't have done. The public is willing enough to support periodicals that deal with these things from the viewpoint of superstition, but not one that approaches them from the angle of scientific research."

"Come off it, Carruthers," I told him. "What else is it but superstition, in spite of all that Rhine has to say about it?"

"That," he said, "is a matter of opinion. I seem to remember one night—it was just after the war—when *you* were a very badly frightened young man. It was just after I'd started the magazine, *New Horizons*, and we had a seance in my flat. We raised *something*—remember?—and it started throwing the furniture around."

"*You* may remember," I said, "that the house next door, and quite a few others, had been demolished by a V-2 rocket some few months previously. What we thought was a polter-geist or something was just the house sagging on its foundations."

"None of the Government surveyors found any evidence of war damage," he told me.

"Surveyors aren't infallible," I said, ordering more beer.

"As far as I know," he said, "the house is standing yet. It was six weeks ago."

"So," I asked, "what?"

He sipped his beer.

"Quite the sceptic these days, aren't you? I suppose that if you saw the Flying Dutchman—do sailors still sight it, by the way?—you'd laugh it off as a mirage."

"Yes—unless I had at least three reliable witnesses and a good camera."

"You didn't use to be so disbelieving," he said. "Remember when you let yourself take part in those experiments involving long range telepathy under hypnosis?"

"That," I told him, "was different."

He laughed. "Yes, it was, wasn't it? As far as I can remember you had some idea that you and your current heart-throb could use long range telepathy as a means of communication and save the expense of Air Mail and radio messages . . . What happened, by the way?"

"She married," I said. "But not me."

"Too bad."

"Oh I don't know. I met her a year ago, quite by chance— as I've met you—and she's put on considerable weight."

"Often these chance meetings are fortunate," he said. "I have a feeling that this one will be for me. And, of course, for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. But, first of all, I'd like to remind you that you were a very good subject for those telepathic experiments. You weren't much use as a transmitter, but you were an excellent receiver."

"Thanks."

"So I'd like your help."

"Sorry," I said. "I can't afford the time. We sail tomorrow for Brisbane. Surely you must know somebody who could be your . . . your subject."

"I don't. I've been in this city for only four days. I was able to do quite a lot of experimental work on the way out—I travelled in the *Cape Banks*, Do you know her?"

"I do. A filthy old tub. She's due for the breakers after her next voyage."

"So I gathered. But she suited my purpose—far more than a cleaner ship would have done. I was able to investigate a very promising line of research. But now I need help."

"Sorry Carruthers, but you'll have to count me out. I managed to get a ticket for *Around The World In Eighty Days*."

"Turn it in. You'll have no trouble getting your money back. Look at it this way, Whittingham. You're a seaman. Why did you come to sea?"

"It's a job."

"I know that. But you didn't think of it in those terms when you were a kid of sixteen, wearing your first brassbound uniform and still to be seasick for the first time. Why did you come to sea?"

"Adventure, I suppose. It was more glamorous than schoolmastering or bank clerking or keeping the inkwells filled in some dingy office . . ."

Carruthers ordered another round.

"You had a bit of adventure during the War," he said, "as we all did. Apart from that, you've found very little. Am I right?"

"You are," I agreed gloomily.

"You've found," he continued, "that pubs and women are very much the same the wide world over."

"They are," I concurred.

"And you just stay at sea because it's the only way you know of earning a living."

"I might as well get my brass hat now," I admitted.

"Laurel leaves on the peak of your cap, and four gold bands on your sleeve. Where's the adventure in that?"

"They'll be nice to have."

"Unless you stop looking at things in such a ... a suburban way you'll never have an adventure in the Here and Now," he said earnestly.

"What am I supposed to do? Offer myself to the Americans as something better to put inside a satellite than the Russians' moon pups? No thanks. I've no desire to be cremated before my time."

"I," he said, "can offer you adventure."

I began to wonder how much he had had to drink. I began to wonder how much I had had to drink. I remembered the experiments in which I had taken part during a long spell ashore just after the War—and remembered that with them had been a certain excitement that is altogether lacking from everyday life.

"A film," he said, "is only make-believe. Cancel your booking. I can offer you the real thing."

"I've a good mind to take you up on that," I said. "I've had rather too much beer, and it's made me sleepy . . . The way I feel right now I'd probably sleep through the show."

"Good," he said.

"What's good about it?"

"You'll see."

"Anyhow," I demanded, "just what is this adventure you're blathering about? Are you trying to raise the ghost of a bunyip, or what?"

"No. How would you like to visit the Jurassic Era and see the dinosaurs striding royally through the jungle? How would you like to visit the future and see the sky streaked with flame as the big ships take off for the Moon, for the planets?"

"Forgive my being personal," I said, "but aren't you just a little nuts?"

He glared at me, then laughed.

"Oh, physical Time Travel is impossible. I grant you that. Mental Time Travel is different altogether. What about Bridey Murphy?"

"Oh, no," I said.

Our glasses—unemptied—were whipped away as the pub started to shut down for that absurd one hour break that is compulsory in New South Wales. With the other drinkers we found ourselves standing on the footpath, feeling rather disgruntled. Carruthers waved frantically at a passing taxi. It swerved on to the kerb. We boarded the vehicle. My friend gave the driver a Kings Cross address.

"I've plenty of beer in the flat," he said. "We can carry on talking there."

"It might be better," I suggested, "if we had some espresso coffee and a snack."

"Afterwards," he said.

We passed the rest of the drive in silence. I was feeling abominably drowsy. I was almost asleep when the cab pulled up outside one of those big, red brick blocks of flats. Carruthers' Uncle Phil must have been very well-to-do, I reflected. We got out of the taxi, went into the building. We rode an elevator to the fifth floor. We had a long wait while Carruthers fumbled for his key. He found it at last, and we went inside.

It was, of course, a furnished flat—but even during his very short occupancy my friend had contrived to impress something of his personality upon it. There was a bookcase well stocked with all the standard works on the occult, and a few that were new to me. There were pictures that I recognised as having come from the brush of that woman artist who claims to be a witch. There was, standing on a little table of its own, a large crystal ball.

Carruthers told me to sit down. I did so, in one of the two armchairs. He went through to the kitchen and returned with two pint pewter tankards of beer. "To adventure," he said, raising his mug.

"What is all this about?" I asked.

He went to the bookcase, pulled out one of the volumes. He handed it to me. It was Dunne's *An Experiment With Time*.

"You've read this," he said.

"Yes. But it was a long time ago."

"All right. I'll refresh your memory. We'll ignore the dreams that Dunne used as proof for his theory; we'll just consider the theory itself. I'm afraid I'll have to put it rather crudely; I'm no mathematician. It all boils down to this—we live in a multi-dimensional universe. We'll ignore the fifth, sixth and so on dimensions—we'll concentrate on the first four."

"Height," I said. "Length. Breadth. And Time."

"Agreed."

"Well, what about them?"

"Look at it this way, Whittingham. You cut a pencil in two. What do you get?"

"Two pieces of pencil. Or two pencils, if you sharpen them both."

"No. No. Where you cut—I'm assuming that it's a nice *clean* cut . . ."

"That's almost impossible with a pencil. They usually split endwise."

"Have you ever tried to cut a pencil in two?"

"Yes," I told him.

"Imagine a sausage . . ."

"Salami?"

"If you like."

"I could do with some right now," I said.

"Oh, all right."

He went out again to the kitchen, returned with rolls, cheese, butter and a length of salami. He set them down on the table between our two chairs. He picked up the carving knife.

"Now," he said, after he had finished cutting, "we have a series of two dimensional samplings of a three dimensional object."

"You can hardly call those hunks two dimensional."

"Perhaps not—but their surfaces are."

"Not bad sausage," I said. "But we should be having Chianti with it, not beer."

"You'll have to drink beer and like it. To get back to Dunne—just as these slices of sausage are two dimensional samplings of a three dimensional object, so are you a *three* dimensional sampling of a *four* dimensional object . . ."

"I remember now," I said, my mouth full of bread and salami. "World Lines, and all that. We are relatively small in three dimensions and greatly elongated—we hope—along the fourth, which is Time. Our World Lines extend from the womb to the tomb and along them, at a uniform rate, travel our sparks of consciousness. But they must take time to do this. Which brings us to a new sort of Time—the Fifth Dimension . . ."

"Never mind that."

"Oh, but it's important. Without it—and without all the other dimensions, ad infinitum, we'd never have Free Will."

"Never mind that, I said. All we're concerned with right now is the Fourth Dimension. Your World Line, you said, stretched from the cradle to the grave?"

"Yes."

"Then you're wrong. You must have had ancestors, other-wise you wouldn't be here. Your World Line stretches back and back, through them . . ."

"Hence Bridey Murphy. Perhaps."

"Then, suppose you have children, your World Line will stretch, through them, indefinitely into the future."

"Indefinitely we hope," I said.

"Indefinitely we hope. Well, you've read Dunne. You've read about his precognitive dreams."

"I've had a few myself."

"Most of us have. You know the theory of it. You know that a dream, any dream, is based upon memories—and that these memories may be of the Future as well as of the Past."

"Yes."

"Then why shouldn't you dream of the racial Past, the racial Future?"

"Why not?"

"Of course," he went on, "the whole damned trouble with dreams is that they're so unpredictable. If you could go to bed tonight with the intention of dreaming the winner of . . . of . . . What's the big race out here?"

"The Melbourne Cup."

"All right. If you could go to bed tonight with the intention of dreaming who was going to win the Melbourne Cup . . ."

"It was run three weeks ago," I told him.

"Oh, skip it. I have enough money to do me, anyhow."

"I haven't," I reminded him.

He ignored this.

"On the way out here I studied Dunne. I tried to work out some way in which we might get some sort of information about the really distant past—and the future. I think I succeeded—but there was nobody aboard the *Cape Banks*, either crew or passenger, who was a suitable subject. I must have a good telepathic receiver. And you're one."

I finished my bread and sausage, washed them down with beer.

"There's no risk, I suppose?" I asked.

"Didn't you say that you ran away to sea because you wanted adventure?"

"I didn't run away to sea—I entered the profession through the normal channels. In any case, it was a long time ago. Furthermore, my ship is sailing tomorrow, and like any good Chief Officer I have my employers' interests at heart . . ."

"There's no risk," he said, a little scornfully.

"I still can't see where telepathy comes into it," I said. "I can see the point of using hypnosis to tap the racial memories—but telepathy . . ."

"It's a new technique."

"Well, I'll give it a go. There're quite a few things I want to see. Would it be possible to find out just who *did* write Bill Shakespeare's plays? And what was the truth about the first Elizabeth? And . . ."

"It's a new technique," he said. "To begin with, I'm going to try to send you as far back as I can. It'll be quite a few million years before Shakespeare and Elizabeth I."

"You hope."

"I'm pretty certain. I'll have to hypnotise you first, of course."

"A deep trance? That's when you get clairvoyance, isn't it?"

"No. Not a deep trance. And clairvoyance has nothing to do with it." He got up, shifted the tray with the remains of our meal on to the floor. He put the beer mugs beside it. He brought the crystal ball from its own table, set it before me. Beside it he placed a small cardboard box. "Now," he said, "I'll turn off all the lights but one."

"What's in the box?"

"It's part of the apparatus. Now, Whittingham, relax. You're tired, very tired. You've had a hard day. You're tired . . ."

So it went on. We got to the stage when I had my hands up behind my head, with the fingers interlocked, and he told me to break the grip and bring my arms down to my sides. I knew that I could do so quite easily if I wanted to—but I didn't want to. After all—I was supposed to be co-operating.

Then, after he had suggested that I do so, I was looking into the crystal ball. The thing seemed to be glowing with a light of its own—but that, I knew, was impossible. It was no more than a freak of reflection or refraction. The thing was glowing with a light of its own, and there were movement and colour in its depths. Then the ball was gone, and the room was gone, and I was standing on what seemed to be rough gravel. All around me towered the stems of what might have been bamboos—but they were like no bamboos that I had ever seen. They were too sparsely jointed, and they were too tall. I looked up, saw a grey, overcast sky, saw something flap slowly overhead. I felt a moment of panic, remembering Carruthers' talk of the Jurassic Era. There were the great flying lizards in those days. But this thing was no pterodactyl or pteranodon. It was a butterfly—but it was huge, bulking as big as a B29.

The earth was shaking beneath me.

I looked around. I had thought that the butterfly was enormous—but what I saw approaching, but dimly (it was too big for me to see it properly) was like a mountain walking. It towered against the grey sky like a grey skyscraper. There was—but incredibly distant—the suggestion of a reptilian head, with eyes and teeth. Then, directly over me, was a great foot the size of . . . of . . . Have you ever been down in a drydock and looked up at a ship when she's on the blocks? That's what the foot was like.

And that was the last thing that I saw, although presumably my host must have escaped. There can be no such thing as racial memory unless it is transmitted. It was the sheer, night-mare terror of it all that snapped me back abruptly to the Here and Now. I wanted to make an end to the experiment—but the hypnosis was still effective. I wanted to get up from the chair, but I could not.

"What did you see?" asked Carruthers urgently. "What did you see?"

Speaking slowly and distinctly, missing no detail, I told him. I watched him open the lid of the box that stood by the crystal, watched him sprinkle some grains of a white substance into it. He replaced the lid.

"Sugar," he murmured to himself, "and a derivative of marihuana ... It should work . . ." Then, to me, "Watch the crystal."

I watched the crystal. I didn't want to, but I did. I saw the swirling colours, the shifting shapes. Then, as before, I was inside the thing. I was standing on what seemed to be a very rough concrete. It was a building that I was inside, a castle that must have been erected by giants. But it was a ruined castle. Through great fissures in the wall streamed sunlight.

There was something moving, something coming towards me over that rough floor. It was big, about the size of an elephant—yet it was small in comparison to the vast area over which it was running. But such matters as comparative sizes—excepting insofar as the thing and myself were concerned—had ceased to worry me. The beast was a rat—and, obviously, a hungry one. I felt the terror that was felt by my host. I hoped that I would wake up as I had done before. I did not.

Then I was climbing the wall. The wall? The cliff, rather. I paused, slewed sidewise and looked down. The rat was still there. It was jumping, its great yellow fangs bared. Then, suddenly, it screamed, and its side suddenly sprouted a profusion of little shafts from around which oozed the blood, matting the coarse, grey fur. *Arrows*, I thought. *Arrows* . . .

The rat fell writhing to the ground, kicked convulsively and was still. I watched the hunters walking in single file towards the huge carcass. Some carried bows, some spears. I thought of the centaurs of legend—the horse body, the man torso, the four feet for running, the two hands—and was amazed to see that there was, in actuality, a solid foundation of fact for the myth.

One of the hunters saw me clinging to the wall, fitted arrow to string, drew and let fly. In the fraction of a second before the shaft struck I saw that the strange beings were not centaurs.

They were ants.

A badly frightened Carruthers brought me round.

Badly frightened he was, but not too badly frightened to ask me, while I was sipping my second brandy, what I had seen. I told him.

"I know it was all just a dream," I said, "but there are two points that puzzle me. The first—why, each time, was everything excepting myself, so huge? I've seen reconstructions of dinosaurs in museums, and none of them was like the Empire State building on legs. And a butterfly the size of a heavy bomber would be just impossible. And the second time—that was worse, if anything. A rat the size of an elephant, ants the size of men, and carrying weapons in their forelimbs!"

"And the second point?"

"This. I'll assume that you did actually send me back into the past somehow, and that I did have dreams based on racial memories. In the second dream my host was, presumably, killed. How the hell did he transmit the memory of his death to his descendants?"

"I need some of this," muttered Carruthers, helping himself to a generous slug of brandy.

"I can't see why *you* should be so shaken up."

"Can't you? I'll answer your second question first. You got the memory of your host's death *through his ancestors*. That was the Future, not the Past—but his racial World Line runs from Now to Then. Of course, taking Serial Time into account, that was only one of the many possible Futures . . ."

I felt sick.

"What about this business of sizes?" I asked at last, to change the subject.

He managed a rather pallid grin. He got up, went to the bookcase, took out a book and handed it to me. I read the title—*the lives and times of archy and mehitabel* I opened the volume at random—and found myself scanning a piece of the immortal archy's verse, *the ballade of the underside*.

"I see from the underside," I read aloud.

"And archy," said Carruthers, "was the soul of a *vers libre* poet reincarnated in the body of a cockroach."

"And he wrote his stuff," I went on, "by hammering the keys of the typewriter with his head. He could never manage the shift lock—that's why there's no upper case. All very amusing, and I'm a great admirer of archy and mehitabel myself—but why change the subject?"

"The *Cape Banks*" said Carruthers, "is a verminous old tub."

"I know."

"She has rats. She has ants. She has bedbugs. She has cockroaches."

"I know."

"Funny things, cockroaches," he went on. "They seem to be proof against mutation. The cockroach of today is practically identical with his ancestor of, say, Jurassic times. That means that we have continuity. That means that we have no breaks in the race memories. There were no men, you know, coexistent with the dinosaurs. Anyhow, the cockroaches with whom I shared my cabin on the way out set me to thinking, and thinking about more things than insecticide. The trouble was that I couldn't find a telepathic receiver. It was quite infuriating—that vast reservoir of racial memory untapped and no means of tapping it.

"Anyhow, I worked out the theory of it, and came up with the conclusion that it should work both ways—Past and Future. Having survived so long the practically indestructible arthropod is likely to go on surviving—and, furthermore, to survive unchanged, no matter what radiations may be released in future wars . . ."

He opened the lid of the box. I looked down at the filthy little thing inside with loathing.

"This one," he said, "may well be unique . . ."

"May it?"

I snatched the box from his hands, threw it down to the carpet. I ground it and its occupant under my heel.

"And you can tell your ancestors all about it!" I snarled.

Since then Chance has not seen fit to throw Carruthers and myself together again.

I hope she never does.

—Bertram Chandler