

The Time Traveler

by Anthony Grooms

The Time Traveler had been gone but a minute, when Filby, combing his fingers through his ginger hair, turned to the Psychologist and proclaimed, "That's the last we shall see of him."

The Psychologist was still dumbfounded, having seen, what he could only think of as a rigged carriage, disappear in front of his eyes. "There...there must...there is some trick here. An illusion of some sort."

"Did you not see it, dear man? Our friend has gone back into time. There's no doubt about it. I have checked his calculations time and time again and I suppose that he is right on every proposition but one." Filby walked to the heavy mahogany serving table and poured a sniffer of cognac. "Care for one?" He offered the glass to the Psychologist, and pointed a finger at the other men, who stood in various places in the darkened solarium as if they were shell-shocked. "He's excellent taste in brandies. But, yes, old man, alas, we have seen the last of him but for one oversight."

"And that?" said the Psychologist extending a nervous hand to accept the glass.

Filby poured a glass for himself, took all of its contents into his mouth, swished it about with a grimace and swallowed. He poured another glass and indicated the bottle to the Psychologist. He sat in a straight back chair rather than one of the ergonomic armchairs especially designed by the time travelling host. He faced the center of the greenhouse and looked at the empty spot on the tile from which the Time Traveler's contraption had vanished. "He's right about the four dimensions. That concept I readily agree with." He looked over at the Doctor who was slumped in one of the ergonomic chairs as if he had fainted. The Doctor opened his mouth but no words came out.

"I do see it," said the Young Man, turning away from the window. "I think I do. Time is the fourth dimension and we might travel along it, if we had the means, as one would walk the length of a road or climb the stair in any of the other three dimensions." The hand in which he held a cigar shook and sent a shower of ashes over the philodendrons and pteridophytes.

"My dear lad," said Filby, "he *has* discovered such a means and he is gone. But for one misconception—a fatal one, I am afraid"—

"Damn you," the Doctor said, bolting up in his chair. "How can you be so bloody glib about it?"

"Glib? Not in the least. A great scientific moment has occurred—if nothing else, a man has disappeared into thin air. But as to where he has gone, none of us can tell for his miscalculation is that—there is *no* past! No past to travel to. You must see that the persistence of time—the seeming duration of time—its persistence in the past—is put a trick of the human mind." He reached and tugged on the Psychologist's sleeve. "Surely, you see? Things—material things—exist but *instantaneously*. They seem to have duration only because they exist from instant to instant to instant. The past is wiped clean—nothing material can exist but in the moment."

"I see where you are going with this, but suppose, just suppose," the Psychologist said, "that your—dark past—comes to light when there is a consciousness to observe it. So then, our friend, though he may be just here"—he gestured toward empty place in the floor—"he is indeed traveling—his *mind* is traveling to those moments which have come before."

Filby took a swallow of his cognac, walked to the serving table, and poured more in his glass, though it was not yet empty. "Nonsense. I don't believe it. He's traveled nowhere since there is nowhere to travel too."

"Perhaps to the future," the young man offered.

"Even more ridiculous. Nothing has yet been impressed upon the fabric of the future. It is as blank as a slate board." No sooner had he spoken than a wind, a kind of dust devil, seemed to

have come from nowhere. The young man jumped aside of the empty part of the room, and soon it began to fill with a whining and then, as if a veil of gossamer, the contraption that had not ten minutes earlier disappeared from the space began now to materialize. Soon was as solid as iron. The Time Traveler, wearing a driving cap and gloves and a gas mask opened the door to the carriage and fell onto the floor. Quickly, the Doctor was ran to aide him.

"Great Jupiter, man, what's the matter?" the Doctor said, lifting the Traveler's head to his lap.

It was a moment before the Traveler spoke to his companions who had gathered close around in spite of the Doctor waving them away, warning "to give the man air."

"Why he's as grim as death," said Filby.

"But he has returned," the Psychologist said in a tone that sounded a bit triumphant. "He has returned."

The Doctor fed the Traveler a sip of the cognac and soon he was able to rise to his feet and sit in one of the armchairs.

"Well?" demanded Filby.

"Well, indeed," the Traveler said.

"But what did you see? Where did you go?" the young man ejaculated.

"I went..." . The Time Traveler straightened himself in the chair and looked Filby squarely in the face. "I went to the past. Just as I said I would. I traveled back in time."

"Impossible."

"And yet, I have done it."

"Where did you go?" The young man said. His eyes were wide and his face pale. "To time of Solon? To the Pharaohs?"

"No time so grand. Only a few minutes back into this hour."

"And what was there—did you see us? Did you see yourself?"

The Traveler sighed and put a hand on the shoulder of the young man. "No lad. I saw nothing. There was nothing to see!"

"Ah-ha!" cried Filby. "As I postulated!"

"No." The Traveler said. "You postulated that there was no past. The past is surely there, only...there is no history. No landscape. There are no events. No people. Only a deep darkness. There was not even sun or starlight. Just a blackness so black as to be heavy and suffocating. A vacuum, but a vacuum of universal space."

"How like a hell..." said the Psychologist.

The Time Traveler pulled himself to standing and unsteadily walked back toward the carriage, stopped and addressed his friends. "No, not at all hellish."

"But"—

In such a blackness, it is but a moment before the mind begins to play tricks. First, I saw sparks and streaks of light that appeared out of nowhere. 'What are these?' I thought. 'Some elemental forms of existence. Some atoms of reality?' And then I realized they were in my mind—having seen no such darkness—I dare say—not even in the bowels of the earth—was making its own lights. And then, as if some... some phantasm from Edison's Kinetoscope, I began to see a past—my own past." He looked to the ceiling of the solarium. A moon shone through the broken clouds. "I saw my mother all these years sainted. First, it was if she were in a blue haze, and then as real as you or I. How my mother held me close as she did when I was a boy! How she smelled of rosewater!" Quickly, the Traveler moved about the machine, checking, it seemed to others, to see if it were operational.

"Great Zeus!" the Doctor said, "you don't intend to go back?"

Already the Traveler was inside the carriage, with his hand on door. "You must understand," he said, a determined look in his eye and a faint smile on his face, "it was *paradisiacal*!"

Filby reached out to grab the door handle, but jerked back his hand when the air began to whirl around the machine. The machine whined and began to turn to vapor.

