

fiction

By Robert F. Young

he knew his brilliance would be rewarded—even if it wasn't in this world

The Time Machine

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: At long last my time machine has become a reality! Late afternoon sunlight filters through its translucent panels, lies like a golden carpet upon the floor of my lodgings. Traffic noises from far below, muted by its photon field, faintly reach my ears as I recline upon the satin pillows of my sumptuous studio couch, gazing fondly at the concretion of my lifelong dream. Soon—tonight, perhaps no later than tomorrow—I shall take that giant step forward so long envisioned by my erstwhile colleagues and myself. And I shall never return.

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: The time machine is the dirty window of his lodgings seen through thick subjective lenses. His lodgings consist of a sordid fourth-story room that contains a bed, a chair, a bureau and a lavatory. In one corner of the room there is a pile of empty wine bottles. In another corner there is a pile of dusty notebooks. Scraps of paper covered with erratic jottings litter the floor. He is lying on the bed, wearing the same clothes he wore yesterday and the day before, that he has slept in for two nights running. The toilet is down the hall.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: The machine incorporates the photon-diffusion principle I described in the paper that I published in the *Scientific Ledger*—the same paper, incidentally, that estranged my colleagues and led ultimately to my expulsion from the project. The warp principle, on which the original grant for the project was obtained, has become in their eyes a sort of sacred cow, and in advancing a much more practicable solution to the problem of time travel I inadvertently desecrated the cow and brought down their collective wrath upon my head. Thus, instead of heaping upon my paper the encomiums it deserved, they contemned it and relegated it to the project's dusty files.

However, I should not judge them too harshly. Hutchinson, Hull, Stasser, Bodin—they are all fine and honorable men, dedicated to the attainment of the noble goal for which the project was created, in their hearts as eager as I to find the doorway to tomorrow. The paper was a mistake—I see that now. I never should have published it. It served only to antagonize them, to turn them against me.

No, I should not judge them too harshly

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: He could not judge them harshly enough. Hull is a middle-class snob, Stasser prizes his little brain as though it were a gold nugget, Bodin loves himself scarcely less than he loves his neighbor's wife. As for Hutchinson, the position he was born to fill is that of postmaster in some small, smug American town.

It is true that they are dedicated men. But they are bureaucrats first and scientists second, and it is to the perpetuation of the project per se that they are dedicated, not to the attainment of its goal. Grieze's diametrically different approach to the problem of breaching the time barrier impugned the validity of the warp principle and jeopardized future grants. For them to have endorsed it would have been unthinkable.

Nevertheless, it was not Grieze's paper that occasioned his dismissal. It was Grieze himself. Grieze is a drunk. It is said that drunks are born. In Grieze's case, this is not quite true. He became a drunk at the age of seven when his second-grade schoolteacher slapped his face, repeatedly and resoundingly, for committing the heinous crime of whispering to the girl who sat behind him. The years that elapsed between that moment and the moment he took his first drink are irrelevant.

But to say that Grieze is a drunk only serves to give credence to the official—not the real—reason he was fired. There is an old verse:

*I do not love thee, Dr. Fell;
The reason why I cannot tell;
But this I know, and know full well:
I do not love thee, Dr. Fell.*

Grieze is endowed with what must be called, for lack of a better term, anticharisma. No one likes him. No one ever has. He turns everybody off. Men, women, children.

His wife, Mildred, loved him for a little while, but she never liked him.

Even dogs do not like him.

It is highly probable that his second-grade school-teacher hated him.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: If ever an occasion called for a celebration, this one does. I go over to my liquor cabinet, select a bottle of my favorite brandy and pour myself three generous fingers. Returning to the couch, I take a measured sip and resume my position on the comfortable pillows—

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: He steps over to the battered bureau, uncaps the pint of Old Friar muscatel he brought home with him after spending the afternoon in the Poker Chip Cafe, carries the bottle back to the bed, takes a long pull and flops back down onto the filthy sheets.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: I resume my contemplation of the time machine. The longer I gaze at it, the more fascinated I become, the more compelled to set sail at once for Tomorrow. There is no longer any need for me to tarry. I have been to see Mildred and have said goodbye to her. I went there this morning. It is true that I said goodbye mutely and from a distance. It would have been cruel to have acted otherwise. Moreover, I do not believe. I could have borne the pain and the distress that would have leaped into her eyes had I told her point-blank that I am going away, never to return. It is better this way—better that she be apprised gradually by my continued absence that the life we shared has officially come to an end—that she must continue without me.

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: He stood on the wind-blown corner, shivering in the wind, and watched her come out the door by which both had once gone in; watched her descend the porch steps and walk down the walk to the gleaming Olds 88 in which her latest lover waited behind the wheel; stood there, seeing neither car nor driver, only her walking—walking down the walk, lithe and graceful, lovely still, despite the years, and the remembered face still thin, thinner, perhaps, yet soft, soft, soft, the memories serving as a gauzy veil to hide the hardness he had always known was there and pretended wasn't, the way he pretended then, standing on the wind-blown corner shivering in the wind of time.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: But tonight is not a suitable occasion to brood over sad farewells—tonight is an occasion to make merry, to go forth and show the world by one's very demeanor, by the jauntiness of one's step, that time's seemingly rigid prison bars can be bent and that its seemingly impervious prison walls can be breached.

I finish my brandy, rise from my sumptuous couch and replace the glass on the liquor cabinet. Leaving my lodgings, I descend the apartment manor's helical stairway to the avenue—

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: He kills the rest of the pint, gets up from the rumpled bed, tosses the bottle into the corner, leaves the wretched little room and lurches down four flights of noisome stairs to the street.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: In the last light of day I walk north to Center, where the posh Poker Chip stands upon the corner, its windows glowing warmly in the dusk. Entering the elegantly furnished interior, I stride, over to the leather-upholstered bar along whose length a number of neatly dressed businessmen are sitting, their attention focused on the television screen, where an American historical drama is in progress. At length Dave, the bartender, perceives my presence and, smiling warmly, comes over to where I am standing and asks me what I would like. It happens that my favorite brandy is freshly out of stock. Since my sensitive palate will not tolerate inferior brands, I turn my back on the bar and stride from the room—

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: He goes into the shabby little gin mill where he spent the afternoon and a hundred other afternoons, edges between two winos who ate watching *Gunsmoke* and orders a glass of muscatel. When the bartender refuses to serve him, he returns unsteadily to the street.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: I visit three similar establishments and in each I am told the same sorry tale. It is too much. Worse, the sudden dearth of my favorite brandy serves to point up a truth of which I have long been aware but up to now have avoided facing: The present no longer takes cognizance of my whims and wants—in effect, it has forgotten my existence. I am stranded on a lofty peak, washed there by the ebb and flow of the cruel human tide—a lonely pinnacle from which there is no descending

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: It is a pinnacle of his own making. It is constructed of empty muscatel and white-port bottles mortared by Grieze's middle-class devotion to a never-quite-realized *poshlust* life style and by his inability to see either himself or the world with more than an iota of objectivity.

How long ago did he lower the filmy curtain through which he gazes with muscatel-muddied eyes? Through which cheap wine takes on the texture of expensive brandy and the telangiectasis afflicting his face passes for the rose-red bloom of youth? Was it when he realized that the project to which he had devoted ten years of his life was but another bureaucratic hoax? Was it when he discovered that his colleagues thought no more of him because of his mind than the rest of the world did because of his personality? Did it date back to the moment he first knew, without quite knowing how he knew, that his wife shared someone's bed besides his own?

Or did he lower it on that distant, consciously forgotten day when his second-grade schoolteacher slapped his face?

Such curtains are not easily come by. Sometimes they require half a lifetime to create. Thus, while Grieze probably lowered his when he was seven, it only gradually acquired the consummate distortion effect that characterizes it today.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: After stopping at a discreet little liquor establishment and purchasing two bottles of the brandy so inexplicably lacking in the better bars, I return to my apartment manor and ascend the helical stairway—somewhat wearily, I must admit—to my lodgings.

I do not switch on the lights. I do not feel like brightness. Besides, the time machine provides illumination enough. As I stand there toasting it, I am captivated by its simple lines, awed by the unlimited freedom it represents. Its photon field pulses with a red raw energy reminiscent of a powerful neon light. The redness washes over me and the walls and ceiling of my lodgings seem bathed with blood.

As I stand there, unmindful of the onward rushing river of the night, deaf to the cacophony of the city, blind to all else save my machine, I am gradually overwhelmed by the conviction that my moment of departure is at hand. The machine's controls are preset, its portal will open of its own accord. The photon field will transmit me the instant I leap into it.

The muscles of my calves and thighs tense in anticipation of my command. But the command does not come. Something draws me back into the room. I find that I am sweating, that my entire body is trembling. A terrible exhaustion washes over me and I collapse upon the couch. There, I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: Dreamless to him, because he will not remember the dream.

It is a recurrent dream. In it, he is making his way through the gray aisles of a rain-canopy forest. The aisles are anfractuons and not a single ray of sunlight reaches them through the thick foliage above. Around him in the gloom, the leaves of the trees are whispering. He does not want them to whisper and he begs them to be still—not to betray his whereabouts to his pursuer. There is a native settlement not far away, and if he can reach it before he is overtaken, he will be safe.

But it becomes increasingly evident that the leaves do not want him to reach the settlement, for they keep whispering louder and louder, unerringly pointing out his position with their tiny sonic fingers. *He is here! He is here! He is here!* Up ahead, there is a faint stirring of the underbrush. The crack of a snapped twig reaches his ears. He halts in a sudden silence. Around him, the world stands still.

He wants to turn and flee, but cannot. He is certain that his pursuer, guided by the whispering of the treacherous leaves, has detoured around him and waits for him to pass. Then the underbrush parts revealing, to his consternation and delight, the face of a rosy checked girl.

Smiling at him reassuringly, she steps out of the underbrush. She is tall, lithe and lovely. Her clothing consists of a miniskirt woven of leaves and kick-boots made of bark. From each of her nipples is suspended a silver pendant shaped like a U235 atom. Her black hair drifts down to her shoulders, emitting sporadic sparks of pulsing light.

She points at a right angle to the direction he has been traveling, beckons him to follow her and plunges out of sight among the trees. Certain that she knows a short cut to the settlement, he plunges after her. Only she can save him now. Already he can hear his pursuer's padded footsteps behind him, the sound of heavy breathing, the susurrus of tawny flanks brushing against tangled vines. And above these sounds, the tattletale whispering of the leaves.

Up ahead, the nymph has halted. Now she turns and beckons furiously to him hurry. Leg muscles straining, his heart a clenched fist in his chest, he tries to obey. Subtly the ground beneath his feet acquires a strange softness. It seems to be caving in. It *is* caving in! Grass, twigs, dead leaves, earth are all falling, falling, and he is falling, too. Down, down, down. Above him, the dryad laughs: below him, he can see four waiting serpents, each bearing the face of a man. He recognizes Hutchinson, Masser, Hull and Rodin. All of them are smiling broadly and presently they interweave their ophidian bodies to form a fireman's net to break his fall. He is saved!

The net proves to be as resilient as a trampoline, and after he lands on it, he finds himself rebounding from the pit; it is all a great joke, he sees that now: the dryad is still laughing and she has been joined by the gaunt lioness from whom he has been fleeing and the two of them, the lioness and the dryad, are sitting on the edge of the pit, laughing uproariously, the lioness displaying two great tiers of gleaming Pepsodent-polished teeth. As he passes, she makes a playful swipe at him with her right forepaw, catching him on the side of the head and tearing away half of his face. The force of the blow sends him cartwheeling back through the forest aisles to the dawn of a new day.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: My lodgings are cobwebbed with the remnants of night as I arise to greet the morning. Dawn has painted the panels of the time machine a pale pink.

I step into my ultramodern bathroom, its chrome fixtures and gleaming porcelain tiles, and perform my morning ablutions.

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: He goes over to the lavatory and splashes cold water onto his face, forgetting that he urinated in the bowl the night before.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: Refreshed. I return to my study. Upon the floor beside studio couch are two bottles whose labels bear the name of my favorite brandy. Both, inexplicably, are empty. A thorough investigation of my liquor cabinet reveals it to be empty too. I am horrified at my own thoughtlessness. Suppose some visitor arrives—what can I possibly offer him to drink? In this day and age of frequent callers, it is downright indecent to have nothing in the way of liquid refreshment on one's premises. I must remedy the oversight at once.

I start for the door, only to be drawn up short by the dawnlight, which by this time has crept into the room. No vendor will open his establishment to me at this hour, even were I able to rouse him. It will be an eternity before I can set aright the hospitality of my house.

Any moment, some visitor may arrive. In God's name, what am I to do?

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: He has not had a visitor since the landlord dunned him for the rent three weeks ago. Other than that, the only person ever to come to his door during the ten months he has inhabited the loom is the hooker who lives down the hall. She knocked one evening when business was dull and offered him a cut rate lay. He told her he wasn't interested.

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: In my anguish, I begin pacing the floor. Presently, I discover that I already have three visitors—three beldams who apparently entered when my back was turned. They are wearing Salvation Army uniforms and carrying tambourines. They follow me about, shaking the tambourines, but I have no change to give them. Their faces seem to be made of bread dough, which they keep kneading with their free hand into different shapes, each more gruesome than its predecessor.

I try to avoid bumping into them, but this is difficult and becomes more so by the second, for the floor is swarming with vermin and I have watch every step I take in order not to crush one of the horrifying little creatures beneath my feet. I make a mental note to report this deplorable state of affairs to the

landlord next time I see him. If he again refuses to call in an exterminator, I shall go directly to city hall and ask to sue the building inspector.

In the meantime, I must be careful. More and more vermin are emerging from the mopboards and climbing up through the register; the air is filled with their minuscule squealing and squeakings; their baleful BBs of eyes gleam and glisten in the pink light that now fills the room. They appear to be organizing themselves, to be forming into ranks. It is as though they are preparing to attack. Too late. I realize that they have drawn themselves up into a Lilliputian army between me and the door.

Oh, they are clever, these loathsome little beasties—but not quite as clever as they think. They have effectively blocked me off from the door, yes—but not from the time machine.

However, I must act quickly before they discover that I have a second avenue of escape and surround me. But not too quickly, lest I precipitate their charge and bring them swarming over me in a noisome unspeakable mass. My three visitors, I note out of the corner of my eye, have departed. Good. Slyly, I turn toward the machine. I am no quite close enough. I take a slow step towards it. Another—

I stand there, frowning. Why am I hesitating? Certainly not because I am afraid. There is nothing to be afraid of. My transition will be virtually instantaneous, the future age I will emerge in can be no less kind than the one I am about to leave. And it is possible that news of my coming will have preceded me, in which case I shall be welcomed with open arms.

Why, then?

A loud whispering comes from behind me. I feel something soft touch me feet. Someone begins screaming into my ear—someone I know very well but whose voice I cannot quite place. I hesitate no longer. My legs bend, straighten: I hurl myself into the machine. Brightness breaks all around me as I penetrate the photon field: the time barrier dissolves into a trillion tinkling sounds then I am falling—twisting, turning, plunging through the continuum, the wind of time whistling past my face. Suddenly, the temporal stresses multiply, come crashing against my body in a great red wave. I blank out.

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: In due course, the time machine receives him to its breast. Although it is already loaded with time travelers, the addition of one more has no effect upon its speed, or equilibrium.

Ineluctably, it forges onward into the future, constantly taking more time travelers on board. All of them except Grieze, who is scheduled for a brief stopover, are bound for the same destination. But this is a misstatement, for at the termination of his stopover, Grieve will reboard the time machine and help it keep its rendezvous with Nowhen.

CAMERA NUMBER THREE: It is raining over Megalopolis 16 and the horizontal vista windows of the R & R Center reception room are adorned with water diamonds. The windows overlook a medley of glass-brick laboratories and pyramidal computer complexes crisscrossed with AstroTurf malls. In the background a range of high-rise apartment towers pierces the low-hung clouds.

The man from TimeLab has the room all to himself. He has been waiting there since early morning. He rises quickly to his feet as the inner-office door opens and the director of R & R appears. "He's on his way," the director says, advancing into the room. "By the time he gets here he'll know who he is—or, rather, who he was."

"Why did it take so long? I was given to understand that R & R has been perfected to the point where it can be accomplished in less than an hour."

"You forget that this is the first time we've gone higher than a chimp. It's true that the more material we have to extrapolate from, the faster we can get the job done, and that in this case we had the entire endoskeleton. But this is our first *man*."

"I want him intact," man from TimeLab says.

"What I can't understand is why you want him at all."

"We need him. We need him desperately. We see him as a sort of savior. Quite by accident, we discovered a paper he published on photon diffusion, and we are convinced from what he wrote he may have the answer to our problem tucked away in the back of his mind."

"How do you know he won't jump out another fourth-story window?"

"We'll have him rehabilitated, of course. But equally important, he'll be working with people who will accord him the love and respect his own age denied him—dedicated people who sincerely believe he can help them find a practicable means of time travel."

The director of R & R laughs "Whether he can or not, at least he'll have the distinction of being the first human time traveler. Do you realize," the director continues in a more sober tone of voice, "that in all the years the services of R & R have been available to the public, yours is the only request we've ever had to resurrect and reconstruct a *man*? That up to now, practically all our work has been in the field of extinct animal species?"

"Naturally. There's no red tape involved in resurrecting a rhesus monkey or a bald eagle."

"You can blame it on red tape if you want to. Or on legal complications or on the papal encyclical condemning the resurrecting of mortals or on food rationing or on the latest census report. But I think there's a much more applicable reason. I think Omar was right. Perhaps you're familiar with the lines:

*"And those who husbanded the Golden grain,
And those who flung it to the winds like rain,
Alike to no such aureate earth are turned
As buried once, Men want dug up again."*

"I am familiar enough with them to know that in quoting them out of context you're trying to justify your own cynicism," the man from TimeLab says icily. "It is my firm belief that basically all men love one another and that, appearances to the contrary, all human beings are completely noble and unselfish creatures."

The director sighs. "I'm afraid the blue whale wouldn't agree with you." A buzzer sounds. "Here's our time traveler now."

CAMERA NUMBER ONE: The stresses are no more. The red wave has gone its way. Awareness is mine once again and I am standing in a crystal paneled corridor before an imposing golden door. A blue-smocked young man—clearly my escort—releases my arm, steps forward and opens the door and nods for me to enter the room beyond.

I comply, noticing as I do so that I am clad in a white suitlike ensemble. Standing in the room are two tall distinguished looking men wearing similar apparel. As I enter, one of them advances toward me, arms outstretched and with a warm smile of greeting on his lips. "Welcome Professor Grieze," he cries. "Welcome to the future."

CAMERA NUMBER THREE: The warm smile of greeting on the lips of the man from TimeLab wavers. His outstretched arms sag slowly to his sides. He realizes with a mild shock that he does not like Professor Grieze.

CAMERA NUMBER TWO: No one likes Professor Grieze. No one ever has. No one ever will.

Nevertheless, the people of TimeLab will put up with him. They will have to. First, they will turn him over to the people of PsychLab, who will dig his second grade school-teacher out of his brain, impale her with a Neo-Freudian stake and make whatever other adjustments are necessary for him to live a sane, sober, relatively happy life. Then the people of TimeLab will take him into their fold and he will join them in their search for a practicable time machine, and none of them, not even the time traveler himself (who by this time, of course, will have been apprised of the true nature of his time trip) will realize that there is only one such machine and that all the while they are looking for it, they are standing on it.