

## About "Interlude at the Circus"

This one was originally published in *SF Review* in February 1992, and found a reprint in the program book for *MagiCon*, the 50th World Science Fiction Convention, in August 1992. That was a memorable convention for me, since I won a Hugo for "A Walk in the Sun" there.

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# Interlude at the Circus

Geoffrey A. Landis

The plaza was a bewildering babble of noise: voices, animal noises, and the clatter of chariot wheels on stone. Jill barely caught the faint voice calling from the opposite side. "Hello? Does anybody here understand me? Hello? Hello?"

She swiveled, trying to locate the speaker. "Over here!" she shouted. She waved her hands like crazy. "Hey! Over here!"

"Hello? Does *anybody* speak English? Hello!"

She spotted him across the crowd, a short man peculiarly dressed--at least, peculiarly dressed for first-century Rome: he wore a button-down shirt and pants. She pressed her way through the crowd.

"Hey! Over here!"

"Thank God!" he said. He rushed over and embraced her, then, before she could react, kissed her on both cheeks. "At least I found *somebody*. For a while I thought that *nobody* here spoke English." He looked at her.

She was an unremarkable woman, of medium height and with short brown hair, but with a disconcerting way of focusing her attention so totally that it seemed that nothing else in the world mattered. She wore a loose brown garment cut from coarse cloth. Beneath it could be seen a finely-woven filigree of silver. "I know. I've been searching for ages, literally ages. Perhaps we should introduce ourselves? I'm Jill Andress."

"Ciam Jardes. Pleased to meet you. God, I am *so* pleased to meet you."

They stood in front of the Colosseum, a Colosseum somewhat smaller and quite different from the one familiar from calendars and picture postcards. It gleamed with fresh lime, and was adorned with gaudy paintings of gladiators and exotic beasts. Vendors with charcoal grills on little wheeled carts--likewise adorned with fanciful beasts rendered in bright primary colors--pushed through the crowd selling wine, meat-pies, roasted nuts, grilled sausages, fried cakes and skewers of greasy black meat. They called out their wares in a language barely recognizable as Latin. The air was pungent with the smells of fried onions, garlic, burnt meat, and charcoal. "So," said Jill, dodging slightly to avoid a horse carrying a patrician followed by his retinue and slaves, "just how did you get lost?"

"Lost? I'm not lost. I know just where I am. And when. It's *home* that's not where it's supposed to be. It got lost when I went to visit the battle of Upper Tutlingen.

"Oh. . . Was that an important battle? I never heard of it."

"Important?" he said, widening his eyes incredulously. "Don't you know any history? That's the battle when Alar Khan died, hit by an unlucky spear thrust, and so the Mongol horde turned back, thus saving all of western civilization."

"Oh. Funny I never heard of it. I never was good at medieval history, though. Was it pretty much like the records said?"

"Yes, just like the description, except that none of the histories mentioned the mud. After the battle it was sticky red mud. And Khan wasn't hit in the chest at all, he was hit in the arm. He didn't die, either. The history books badly distorted the facts, I can say that. When I get back there will be some changes made, I can tell you that right now."

"Yes," said Jill. "I can see that."

"But when I went back home to report, nobody knew me! Nobody spoke English! The whole city of

Londinium was gone!"

"Londinium?"

"There were just *mud huts!* The people painted themselves blue and spoke in awful guttural *grunts!* It was awful!"

"Londinium?"

"They tried to catch me--I think they wanted to *eat* me! So I ran away, back into the past. I tried to find people who spoke English, but nobody did. It was like the whole world had gone daft while I was gone. It was awful, just awful." He stopped abruptly, as if he'd suddenly run out of things to say.

"I see." Jill looked at him. "I think I understand now. It was something similar for me. I invented the time machine--"

"You lie," he said, confidently. "Darius Aquila invented it, even I know that. It was written up in all the broadsides."

"Maybe he did." She laughed. "But in my time, it was me. They all said it was impossible, but I did it. I did! I did all the cautious little experiments. Hamsters, rabbits, yesterday's headlines and tomorrow's stock market quotations. It all went perfectly. So I figured, what the hell, and went to see the crowning of Charlemagne. Just a spur of the moment thing. Well, it was not quite the spectacle you read about in the history books. For one thing, the crown wasn't gold at all, it was brass. Even I could see that. And he was a short, ugly man, and he stank like a dead pig. Everybody in the whole land stank."

"The coronation of who?"

"It doesn't matter. With the amount of jumps we've made between us, he never existed anyway. And when I got home, everybody spoke French."

"French? Hmmp. Whoever this prince was, I never heard of him, so he couldn't have been *very im--*"

Ciam stopped in mid-sentence. A nearly naked man, hairless across his entire body, walked with a long-legged stride through the crowd. He was half a head taller than the tallest person in the crowd, and his skin was tinged faintly greenish. Jardes gasped. "What--"

"Another time traveler!"

"But--"

She grabbed his arm. "Come on!" She dragged him across the plaza. "Hello? Hey, you! Hello?"

The man stopped, turning to stare coldly down at her. "Glozrnitz yrrebszal?"

Jardes pulled her back. "Jill, do you see the gills? He's not human!"

As the green man paused a centurion caught up with him and pulled at his arms, gibbering in Vulgate. The creature picked him up with one hand and tossed him easily across the plaza.

She shook her head. "He must be from the future. The *far* future. More evolution. Maybe bioengineered to live on another planet! Ciam, maybe they've found the solution to our problem!" She looked up at him. "*Sprekken zee Doitsh? Vann fone sint zee?*" She paused. No response. "*Parlay voo Fransay? Ah-bley Espanyol?*"

The creature made a gesture with his hand. The crowd stayed back, cautious. In the distance a group of centurions began to press their way through, swords drawn. "Gzingnot korr! Korr!"

She took a deep breath, and, speaking very slowly, said "When. Are. You. From? Can. You. Help. Us? Please."

The being spat on the ground. "Korr! Gzirlnorl korr!" He gestured again, this time with an almost human shrug. Half a dozen centurions arrived, pushing the two back and warily forming a rough circle around the giant. The being shrugged again and touched a medallion hanging around its neck.

The circle was empty.

After the centurions had dispersed, muttering about the rude, barbarian ways of foreigners, Jill turned back to Ciam. He was still staring, open mouthed, at the spot the giant had stood. She spoke calmly, as if nothing had interrupted them.

"I take it you're a historian?"

"Huh? Oh." He focussed his eyes back on her. "A histogramper? Of course I'm a histogramper. Clearly, no? Who else would wish to visit the past? Are you not also?"

"No," she said. "I'm a physicist."

"A physician?"

"No, a physicist."

"A physicist?" said Ciam. "On Earth, what is that?"

"A person who studies physics. Matter, energy, spacetime; and the relationships between them."

"So, you mean a philosopher of nature."

"I guess so." As they spoke, a short, balding man wheeled a yellow cart up between them. In a sing-song voice (Jill could barely follow one word in four), he extolled the qualities and cheapness of his wares. Inside his black-iron kettle linguini simmered in a garlic and cream sauce. So much for the belief that the Italians hadn't heard of pasta until Marco Polo brought it from China, she thought. "Looks like our languages have diverged a little. I suppose you don't know much about physics--I mean, natural philosophy, do you?"

"No, of course not. Should a histographer study of unsubtle, lifeless things? Clearly no. Just the Aristotle that they make all study in the Collegium."

"I thought so." The street vendor tried to get her to taste a sample, pushing a wooden spoonful right under her nose, all the while continuously talking. She gestured that she had no money, and finally succeeded in convincing him. He left with a cheerful shrug, to accost the next couple with undiminished enthusiasm. "Have you ever heard about Wheeler's alternate worlds?"

"Who?"

Jill shrugged. "I suppose it would hardly have been Wheeler where you're from, anyway. Well, it doesn't matter. You figured you'd pick a place where other time travelers would show up, and just hoped somebody else would find you, didn't you?"

"Precisely. Rome, New Year's day, Zero A.D. Only they don't think of it like that here, of course. But you did. God, I'm getting so damn tired of trying to speak this bastardized, garbage tongue they talk here. You'd think that here of all places they'd speak good Latin, wouldn't you? But I can barely even understand them. For a while I thought I might have to live here. I certainly haven't the least intention of going back to those blue savages."

"Well," she said. "you have to realize that we're from different universes."

He laughed. "You're daft, my lady. For how can there be but one universe? The very notion is a self-contradiction."

"Best sit down." She indicated a marble bench off to the side of the plaza. "Every instant, the universe changes. It branches off into all the infinite possible futures. Many of these aren't very different from each other. Two grains of sand are arranged differently, perhaps. But infinitely many are different. By going back in time, we reach the past common to all the possible presents. When you go forward, you can reach any of the possible futures. I bet you went further back than anyone from your time ever had, right?"

"Correct you are. Indeed, mine was the very first jump of more than a month." His voice was proud. "I, the first time histographer."

"Right. So nobody before could have figured it out, because even if they returned to a changed present it could have only changed in the most minor ways. But you jumped back far enough that the world had time to make many, many variations."

"Like the blue people," he said, slowly.

"Right." A bedraggled peacock nudged against her feet, pecking between the cobblestones for dropped bits of bread. The Romans supposed it good luck to feed them, and often dropped bits of bread on purpose. She moved slightly to avoid it. "Something happened differently, and the English language never evolved.

"So you're saying it's not my fault. It's not something I did that accidentally changed the past."

"No. The worlds divide, and thus multiply, by themselves."

"And so the real present is still there? Then I just have to find it. If we keep searching. . . ."

Jill laughed. "Your present, you mean. No. If you searched a billion universes every second of your life, and lived a billion years, you would not even begin to traverse the infinitude of possible nows."

"You sound so confident. Can you be sure of this?"

She chuckled bitterly. "Oh, it's quite obvious, now. I wish it had been so obvious when I decided to go sightseeing."

"So how do we get back?"

"We can't."

"Don't say that. Please don't say that."

"We can't get back to the exact universe we came from. There are an infinite number, and it would take forever to find the right one."

"No. No, no, no."

"Afraid so, old man. But we probably can find one where English is spoken. We both do, so such worlds as ours could not be so totally improbable."

"You mean, to go back and back again; to keep searching, until we find one that we can fit in."

"That's the best we can hope for" She paused. "Where is your machine? Is it big enough for two?"

He shook his head. Barely big enough for one. I hid it in a grape arbor out past the hills. We must take yours."

She grimaced, and opened the neck of her shirt slightly to expose the network of silvery mesh sheathing her body. "I wear mine. It can only take one."

"Can we modify it?" She shook her head. "Or mine?"

She shook her head again. "I couldn't; and you clearly don't know enough to. We must search separately."

"And if we find not what we seek? Shall we meet again? Perhaps, by the fountain with the marble dolphins? An hour hence?" She shook her head. "But why not? Though we may search for years, still we can return here but an hour hence."

"No. Because there is no such thing as the past. In another interpretation of Wheeler's hypothesis, not only do multiple futures radiate from each point in spacetime, but multiple pasts as well. Every possible past that leads to a given observable present is equally real."

"So?"

"So, once we jump to the future, we return to different pasts. No, once we leave, we will never see each other again."

"I see." He paused. "So this chance meeting is just a brief interlude, never to be repeated." The plaza was almost empty now, except for the peacocks squabbling with the pigeons for the right to scratch the refuse for scraps. Vendors folded up their tents as the distant horns of the arena echoed from the walls with the roar of the crowd. "And we search, with no hope of finding, endlessly. Or until we tire and settle for what we can find." He was silent for a moment, looking at her. "We could end the search now. We could make a home here, together."

With him? Here? "Stay if you will. For myself, I will journey onward. Even if I never find a time to call home, I have yet to tire of the journey."

"We could..." He sighed. "No, I see it could never be. Still, I am glad we have met, though briefly, and never again. And so we say farewell."

She looked at him, seeing him dressed as he was, then imagining him in a lab coat, in a tunic, in a kilt, in a skin-tight jumpsuit, in a thousand million different incarnations. Never repeated? She knew their meeting would be repeated a billion billion times, in all the possible variations, in all the possible Romes.

"*Au revoir,*" she said.

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