

TRAVELLER'S TALE

By GEORGE WHITLEY

A man comes out of time to Pardi's Village—and is shocked to realization of the truth of his journey!

THE bitter wind swept down the valley, bringing with it flurries of sleet. Pardi shivered a little in the deep folds of his dogskin robe and stared resentfully at the bleak, gray sky, unconsciously tightening his grip on his metal-tipped spear.

As hereditary priest of the tribe, he was supposed to be able to exercise a certain control over the weather—but he knew well that such supernatural powers as were ascribed to him existed only in the minds of the more credulous of his flock. The others, most of the men and—even—some of the women, treated him with a half contemptuous tolerance.

Pardi wrenched his mind away from the distasteful track that it was following and thought, instead—it did not require much effort—of the warm, crackling fire in his hut, where Muri, his wife, awaited him.

Then—he caught his breath in sudden panic.

Had the pack, or had another pack, crept unobserved up the valley? That new, shrill whining was never the wind. Neither, the priest realized, after a long moment's agonized apprehension, was it made by any animal. It came from inside the Circle.

What a fool he had been not to let one of the acolytes keep today's watch! And yet—somehow he knew that this was the day on which the Traveler would come to answer all the questions that had for so long troubled the wise men of the tribes.

The priest found shelter of a sort in the lee of one of the strange, grass-covered mounds which, in almost regular array, covered the floor of the valley. From this vantage point he could watch the Circle, that weird, inexplicable phenomenon that had been there since before the memory of the oldest man, that was, according to tribal lore, older than the race itself, without end and without beginning.

The Highway of the Gods, men said it was. Or, as some said—and this legend had always persisted among the priesthood—the highway of the great sorcerers, of men like gods.

It was always calm within the Circle, although the air within its bounds had a sort of quivering tenseness. Neither rain nor snow, neither dust nor mist, seemed able to cross the magic frontier that divided the Circle from the everyday world.

A man, though, could enter its charmed limits. Men had done so. And these men had died, without exception, stricken by some strange ailment that defied all the skill of the tribe's medicine men.

They had died, raving in their last delirium of thundering fire from the earth leaping to meet screaming fire from the sky, of great stone huts, piled one

upon the other, crashing in blazing ruin, of monstrous birds making the heavens their battlefield and diving in incandescent death.

Perhaps, thought Pardi, when I am very old I shall enter the Circle. But not yet. Life is not good, neither is it bad. But I should like to see these wonders before I die.

Down the wind came a long drawn, eerie ululation, the hunting cry of the wild dogs. Was it cattle they were hounding or was it some luckless man or woman? The priest mumbled a half-believed invocation to his dim gods, prayed that the pack would not come his way.

They were devils, these dogs. Man they did not fear and, more often than not, their cunning was more than a match for his weapons, his clumsy but cruel traps.

Pardi breathed a sigh of relief as the menacing sound died away in the distance.

OTHER savages would have turned and fled, but not Pardi. Like so many of his cloth, in all ages and all countries, he was not superstitious. Besides, this was the moment to which he had been dedicated, he and Pardi his father and Pardi, his father, for untold centuries in the dim past of the tribe.

This must surely be the advent of the Traveler!

Within the Circle danced a lambent blue flame, waxing and waning as the volume of the sound rose and fell. At times it was almost invisible, then, again, it would flare to eye-searing brilliance.

Had it been a fire such as Pardi knew, he would have felt its warmth from where he stood. But there was no heat, nothing but that uncanny dancing light that made the dark valley seem more than ever a place of gloom and desolation.

Dim outlines shaped themselves within the pale, flickering fire, the shadow of what appeared to be a sort of a cage or skeleton framework. Behind the weaving rods was the figure of a man, ghostly as yet, insubstantial as the snow wraiths that whirled down the valley, yet gaining substance with every passing moment.

Abruptly, the blue light flared for a last time and steadied to constant intensity. At the same time the noise of the fire reached an unbearably high, almost supersonic pitch and thereafter was audible only as a thin, high whistle.

As Pardi stared, fascinated by that intricate complexity of bars and rods, no longer in motion but seeming to draw the vision down through untold, interminable vistas of space and time, the Traveler stepped from the heart of his singing flame and stood, just inside the Circle, gazing about him with a certain bewilderment.

"Strange—" Pardi heard him mutter, "Can it be the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle? The instruments shouldn't, can't, lie. But I've certainly come the

wrong way!"

The priest stored the strange expressions in his memory. They must, he decided, be words of power. Or, perhaps, the Traveler was offering thanks to his strange gods.

Meanwhile the Traveler had returned to his strange hut of magic rods, was peering at certain small, white circles affixed to a flat board on the side furthest away from Pardi. Once again he came into the open, this time stepping outside the borders of the Circle.

He was, Pardi saw, of about his own height, but with the smooth face of a woman or boy. He was clothed in what seemed to be garments of some woolen weave, but of a texture infinitely finer than that made by the women of the tribe from the poor fleece of the little, half-wild sheep.

A strange framework, resting on the bridge of his nose, covered the upper part of his face. This held, before the Traveler's eyes, two little round windows filled with some transparent substance like ice.

And the man himself? He was, Pardi decided, of the type that, in this day, filled the ranks of the priesthood. Given garments like Pardi's he would have passed for Pardi's brother. This, then, was no god, but some great sorcerer.

A faint, pale ghost of the steady flame within the Circle still clung to the Traveler. Seeing him glowing thus, wanly luminous against the dark background of the valley, the priest felt more than half inclined to revise his original opinion.

The searching eyes behind those little, icy windows found Pardi.

"Good heavens!" cried the Traveler, "a Stone Age man! Hope he's not hostile. I wonder if I can persuade him to come back with me. But how?"

Pardi spoke.

"You are the Traveler," he said.

IT WASN'T a question, it was a statement. There was a certain awe, a suspicion of reverence, in the tones in which it was said—but it was not the superstitious terror that one would expect from an ignorant savage.

Rather it was as though one professional man were addressing another, far superior in rank and qualifications, but, still, no more than a practitioner of the same art.

The Traveler stiffened, as does the wild dog when the arrow finds mark. He stared at the priest with even greater wonderment than that with which Pardi was regarding him.

"Yes," he said at last. "I am a traveler. Out of time. You were expecting me?"

"Of course. Has not the Circle, the Highway of the Great Sorcerers, been here since before the beginning of Time?"

"Before the gods that made the gods had drunk at dawn their fill," quoted the Traveler softly.

"You know the ritual!" shouted Pardi excitedly. "Then you are indeed one of us. And now I know that my sons' sons, or their sons, will be sorcerers such as you, with power undreamed of. But this is heartening news.

"For, year by year, we few holders of the ancient wisdom see that same wisdom fade. Much my father told me, and much I have forgotten. My sons, too, will forget. And it seems that as we of the tribes sink into the swamp of not-knowing, so our enemies, the dogs and the rats, grow fiercer and more cunning.

"My father told me that there was a tribe only two days' march from my village. Last warm season, when the days are long, our young men—we have so few women now—set out to visit them. They found their empty huts, and the ashes of their fires. And their bones."

"So, friend—how do they call you? Pardi? So, friend Pardi, I have brought you hope. Of that I am glad. Even though my—magic did not work properly and sent me the wrong way in time, my journey has not been fruitless. Perhaps I have changed the course of history.

"I will tell you the truth. I, too, was seeking aid. In my time there are certain evil men who would rule the world. And there is raging a battle of sorcerers, our magic against theirs.

"I thought that, at some time in the future, I would find magicians even more clever than ourselves who would put into our hands weapons with which we could save the world."

"A battle of sorcerers?" broke in Pardi eagerly. "Then the old tales are true."

"What old tales?"

"Now and again, a bold man has entered the Circle. And he has died."

"You mean that there is a tabu?"

"Tabu? What is that?" He must have read the other's meaning in his eyes. "No. We did not kill them. They died."

"How?"

"They shone with pale, cold fire, just as you are doing, but not so brightly." The Traveler looked down at his hands with shocked surprise. "And they seemed to waste away. And they told stories of what they had seen within the Circle."

"What did they see?" demanded the Traveler, his voice urgent.

"Fire from the earth leaping to meet fire from the sky, great stone huts, piled hut on hut, to the height of twenty or more, tumbling down in flames, huge birds fighting all along the sky."

THE Traveler had paled, but his manner was icy calm. He had drawn from a pouch in his clothing a little bundle of white sheets, bound around with what looked like leather. On these sheets he was making marks with a little, pointed stick.

"What else?" he asked. "What else?"

"Nothing. Only pictures of people like us, dressed like us; and, of course, now and again a pack of dogs."

"It could be," said the Traveler slowly. "It could be. But now that I have come back to this forgotten age I must have altered history. Instead of art A, B, C, D sequence it will be A plus X, B plus X, and so on—with myself as X. But tell me about yourself, Pardi. You are a priest, I take it?"

"Yes."

"What is your god?"

"There are many gods. But I serve Arp." The pencil scribbled on.

And then, having at last drawn from Pardi his pitiful stock of half-forgotten knowledge, his rather greater accumulation of tribal lore and history, the Traveler talked.

He talked of all the wonders that would be, of huge floating cities crossing the great waters at speeds beyond the priest's comprehension, of great, mechanical birds that would make the most distant lands, lands undreamed of by Pardi, within the compass of a day's march.

And of these same lands he talked, lands where it was always summer, where great, luscious fruit hung, ripe and ready for the plucking, from every tree, and where there were strange men whose skins were yellow, black or brown.

And, he concluded, men were even reaching out towards the very stars. The world was theirs, and all the fullness thereof. Were there not fresh worlds for conquest in the sky?

All this was meat and drink to Pardi. He would never see these things—but his sons would, or their sons. And he, who had viewed the slow, seemingly inevitable decay of the race with unrelieved pessimism now allowed himself to dream of the bright, distant future.

But the Traveler seemed anxious. At increasingly frequent intervals he raised his wrist to glance at a little device strapped thereon.

"I must be getting back," he said at last.

"I wish you could stay with us," replied Pardi.

"I do too. But I, also, have a wife who is waiting for me. And if I delay my return much longer I shall be marooned here forever."

"But why?"

"How can I explain? You have bows and arrows, haven't you? Well, my time machine has stretched the very structure of—things, just as your arm will stretch the string of a bow. But your arm will tire. Sooner or later you must release the string.

"Besides—" Once again the Traveler raised his hand but, this time, to look with apprehension at the pale radiance emanating from his flesh.

"Before you go," said Pardi, "there is a little custom among my people. The exchange of gifts. I should—" he fumbled for words.

"Of course," said the Traveler. "But—"

He ran his hands through his pockets, seeking something that would be of value to the other. Nothing. But wait—his watch. It was of metal, and its strap was of metal, and it would, therefore, be immune to the slow decay and disintegration of atomic structure affecting any organic matter coming within the influence of the time machine.

"Here," he said. "It is a device for telling the passage of time. Every day you must wind it—so. And it will have to be set, like this. Do this on a sunny day at high noon."

Inside the Time Machine a red light was flashing and a little bell was ringing.

PARDI took the proffered gift, his face that of one who has received an accolade. Words failed him. Mutely, he thrust the haft of his spear into the Traveler's hands. With an expression of thanks it was taken. The Traveler examined it, looking curiously at the workmanship and crude, feeble attempts at ornamentation.

"But what is this?" he cried, pointing at the head.

"That? Oh, it is a kind of stone we find in the ground. Some is good and some is eaten away with a sort of red rottenness. We even find some already shaped into things, some useful, and some the use of which is beyond our ken. My wife Muri has a fine cooking pot of this ringing stone. Do you know what it is, then?"

"This is manganese steel!"

What a fool I was! thought the Traveler. The instruments didn't, couldn't, lie. And it all dovetails so perfectly. Pardi, an obvious corruption of Padre, those regular mounds that can only be ruins, and—most obvious of all—a common language. That was too obvious—so obvious that I never even noticed it.

He would have liked to have shaken hands with the priest, but feared that his strange affliction might prove contagious.

"Goodby," he said. "And good luck."

"You will return?"

"I am afraid not." He looked again at his glowing hands. He was afraid, very

much afraid. But what did it matter?

"Before you go," Pardi's voice was insistent, "tell me—how long must my sons, and their sons, and their sons, wait before all the wonders of which you spoke come to pass?"

"But I don't—" began the Traveler, then checked himself. Why shatter the dream of this primitive idealist? "Many generations," he lied. "Ten, at the very least." Then, again, "Goodby."

Slowly, he entered the charmed confines of the Circle. For a moment he stood among the intricacies of his machine, hand upraised in a gesture of farewell. It seemed to Pardi, then, that he touched something on the board.

The red light ceased flashing. There was nothing.

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It was very dark in the valley and it was snowing hard. Pardi stared, hardly able to believe his eyes. The floor of the Circle, the Highway of the Gods, was already coated with a thin powdering of white. There was no longer anything to distinguish it from the rest of the valley. It was as though it had never existed.

Pardi mourned for his friend—for the ritual exchange of gifts had a significance undreamed by the Traveler. Yet, even as he mourned, he wished that he had buried his spear in the Traveler's heart as he set foot outside the Circle. For he had given Pardi dreams—and then had shattered those dreams.

He had not even lied convincingly.

It would have been kinder, too, for him, mused the priest. For I, with my spear with its head of the ringing stone, slew his dreams...

Abruptly, he turned away from the Place of the Circle.

The Traveler's gift, unheeded, still clutched in his right hand, he began the long trudge back to the unloved and unlovely squalor of his home.

Out of the night came the approaching cry of a hunting pack.

It was very cold and dark.