

THE BIOGRAPHY PROJECT

There was something tremendously exciting about the opening of the Biofilm Institute. Even a hardened Sunday supplement writer like Wellman Zatz felt it.

Arlington Prescott, a wiper in a contact-eyeglass factory, while searching for a time machine, had invented the Biotime Camera, a standard movie camera—minus sound, of course—that projected a temporal beam, re-accumulated it, and focused it on a temporal-light-sensitized film. When he discovered that he had to be satisfied with merely photographing the past, not physically visiting it, Prescott had quit doing research and become principal of a nursery school.

But, Zatz explained, dictating his notes by persfone to a voxtyper in the telenews office, the Biofilm Institute was based on Prescott's repudiated invention. A huge, massive building, mostly below ground, in the 23rd century style, and equipped with 1,000 Biotime Cameras, it was the gift of Humboldt Maxwell, wealthy manufacturer of Snack Capsules. There were 1,000 teams of biographers, military analysts, historians, etc., to begin recording history as it actually happened—with special attention, according to Maxwell's grant, to past leaders of industry, politics, science, and the arts, in the order named.

Going through the Biofilm Institute, Wellman Zatz gained mostly curt or snarled interviews with the Bioteams; fishing through time for incidents or persons was a nervous job, and they resented interruptions.

He settled finally on a team that seemed slightly friendlier. They were watching what looked like a scene from Elizabethan England on the monitor screen.

"Sir Isaac Newton," Kelvin Burns, the science biographer, grunted in reply to Zatz's question. "Great man. We want to find out why he went off the beam."

Zatz knew about that, of course. Sunday feature articles for centuries had used the case of Sir Isaac to support arguments for psychic phenomena. After making all his astonishing discoveries by the age of 25, the great 17th century scientist had spent the rest of his long life in a hunt for precognition, the philosopher's stone, and other such paraphernalia of mysticism.

"My guess," said Mowbray Glass, the psychiatrist, "is paranoia caused by feelings of rejection in childhood."

But the screen showed a happy boy in what seemed to be a normal 17th century home and school environment. Glass grew puzzled as Sir Isaac eventually produced his binomial theorem, differential and integral calculus, and went to work on gravity—all without evidencing any symptoms of emotional imbalance.

"The most unbelievable demonstrative and deductive powers I've encountered," said Pinero Schmidt, the science integrator. "I can't believe such a man could go mystical."

"But he did," Glass said, and tensed. "Look!"

Alone in a dark, cumbersomely furnished study, the man on the screen, wearing a satin coat, stock and breeches, glanced up sharply. He looked directly into the temporal beam for a moment, and then stared into the shadows of the room. He grabbed up a silver candlestick and searched the corners, holding the heavy candlestick like a weapon.

"He's mumbling something," reported Gonzalez Carson, the lip-reader. "Spies. He thinks somebody's after his discoveries."

Burns looked puzzled. "That's the first sign we've seen of breakdown. But what caused it?"

"I'm damned if I know," admitted Glass.

"Hereditiy?" Zatz suggested.

"No," Glass said positively. "It's been checked."

The Bioteam spent hours prying further. When the scientist was in his thirties, he developed a continuing habit of looking up and smiling secretly. On his deathbed, forty years later, he moved his lips happily, without fear.

"My guardian angel," Carson interpreted for them. "'You've watched over me all my life. I am content to meet you now.'"

Glass started. He went to one Bioteam after another, asking a brief question of each. When he came

back, he was trembling. "What's the answer, Doc?" Zatz asked eagerly.

"We can't use the Biotime Camera any more," Glass said, looking sick. "My colleagues have been investigating the psychoses of Robert Schumann, Marcel Proust and others, who all eventually developed delusions of persecution."

"Yeah, but why?" Zatz persisted.

"Because they thought they were being spied upon. And they were, of course. By us!"

JOURNAL NOTES: The Biography Project

THEME: One time paradox I've never seen is changing history Through invisible observation. That is, if it's not possible to travel through time physically, only via camera or some such, wouldn't the sense of being watched change the lives of those being spied upon?

POSSIBILITIES: Big-scale historical treatment comes to mind first, of course. Maybe this is why first Napoleon and then Hitler didn't invade British Isles. Negative—something that militarily *should* have been done *wasn't* done. Dig deeper; active shadowing can produce dramatic tension as the victim is hounded to desperation, but this is an unverified and unverifiable haunted feeling and it can't be directional, as in shadowing. That indicates emphasis of the psychological. Can't build on the sense of being watched, so it should be used as a snapper. Use characters of the past who went nuts, blame it on the device. (No trite time paradox—history *is* changed, but the change is part of history.)

DEVELOPMENT: Isaac Newton is a fine—because otherwise baffling—subject. But other cases are needed to substantiate the payoff. Can't handle them one after another or even simultaneously; too stretched out. Besides, the longer a surprise punch line is delayed, the greater the chance of being outguessed by the reader. A *project* subsidized by tycoon. (Mild satirical opportunities.) Touch on inventor; disappointed because it's only a way to view instead of visit the past. Keep him out of story—his chagrin would complicate unnecessarily.) Could have member of one of the project teams as central character, but danger of exaggerating technical stuff and emotional reactions. Best protagonist would be a newsman assigned to cover story—wouldn't be too hep or personally involved and can report on project better.

EDITORIAL COMMENT: I'd been holding this idea for some time when a hole appeared in *Galaxy*; two pages had to be filled. I hunted through manuscripts and called agents, but the stories were either telegraphed (the commonest fault in short-shorts) or overlong. So I set the margins on my typewriter and wrote *The Biography Project* to fit. I'd have preferred another few hundred words to move around in, but they couldn't be had, which meant heroic compression. If you check the length, you'll find it's almost exactly 800 words! The technical feat here was to shoehorn needed detail into a plot that couldn't be boiled down so drastically that it made no sense, and to let go of the snapper at the right moment, which, in short-shorts, always means before the reader sees it coming. The whole thing was the sort of challenge that's supposed to be good for one, and definitely is in the development of skill—but it's hell on the nerves.