

The Seeds of Time

The grey eyes of the Time Traveller shone and twinkled, and his usually pale face was flushed and animated as he expounded his new theory. We sat in the garden of his house on Richmond Hill, under a huge clustering wisteria whose purple flowers dangled luxuriantly all around, sharing with us their brief moment of temporary perfection. The sun was setting over the tranquil Thames valley, and its dying rays touched with colour the bubbles that flashed and passed in our glasses. Cattle grazed contentedly in the broad meadow; the white sail of a yacht dipped and slewed along the shining river; and the bright air seemed hushed and suspended, as if time were standing still.

‘Yes’, he said, in conclusion. ‘As I have explained, the machine I have designed is capable of carrying me to any point I choose, in space or in time’.

The three other guests had been introduced to me simply as the Artist, the Scientist and the Newspaper Man. The Time Traveller had lost none of his predilection for both stereotyping and anonymity.

‘So using this machine’, said the Artist, ‘you can now go anywhere, anytime’.

‘Theoretically, yes’.

‘Then to where – and to when - do you plan to go?’

‘That is exactly my purpose in inviting you gentlemen here this evening. My machine is not quite ready for its next expedition. I look to you to furnish me with suggestions as to whither I might travel. What should I attempt to see? To whom should I attempt to speak? Which time, and what place?’

‘The Renaissance!’ cried the Artist immediately. ‘I would wish to see Michelangelo painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel’.

‘Or to speak with Leonardo about his inventions’, put in the Scientist. ‘Find out how his mind really worked’.

‘I would love to discover the true identity of the Mona Lisa!’ said the Journalist. ‘It would make my career’.

‘All in good time’, the Traveller laughed. ‘For my first expedition I had not thought of travelling quite so far in space as Florence and Rome. Have you no interest in the history of your own country? Something a little closer, perhaps’.

‘Then I would wish to witness Holbein painting the portrait of Henry VIII’.

‘I would dearly love to speak to Sir Walter Raleigh, and learn the secrets of the School of Night’.

While the Journalist was still thinking of something to say, I could not forbear interrupting. ‘I would wish to stand in the yard of the Globe Theatre on the first night of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*’.

‘Shakespeare!’ said the Time Traveller, as if the idea had never occurred to him. ‘Why that would be interesting. I could ask him directly if he wrote his own plays! Do you think he would tell me?’ The others laughed. ‘But the age of Elizabeth was a remarkable period. And its history lies buried not more than a few miles from here’.

‘Shakespeare’, said the Artist in a voice of hushed veneration. ‘Sweet Swan of Avon! To be able to return to that Golden Age, when our culture was still unspoiled by industry and commerce! Before the universal mechanization that has ruined our lives!’

‘Balderdash!’ cried the Scientist. ‘The age of Elizabeth was the beginning of the modern age! Industry, manufacture, urbanization, transport, overseas trade, enclosure of the land – all had their origins there’.

‘And yet Shakespeare’s poetry breathes the breath of a cleaner age’, returned the Artist. ‘He dwelt in England’s pleasant land, and knew nothing of our dark satanic mills’.

‘Shakespeare was one of the first modern men’, observed the Scientist, showing himself remarkably well-informed on the subject. ‘He was a businessman and an entrepreneur. He formed one of the first joint-stock companies, composed of sharers in the theatre. He acquired an investment portfolio of property in Stratford and London. He supported land enclosure in Stratford, when most of his neighbours stood against it. His work was progressive and scientific. It has even been suggested that they were written by the foremost scientific philosopher of the day, Lord Bacon! If Shakespeare were alive today, do you think he would be mooning around Hammersmith looking for a boat to take him back to the Middle Ages? He would be our Poet Laureate, writing hymns to modernity and Progress’.

The Time Traveller seemed pleased with the energy of this debate. ‘What is your opinion? He asked of me. ‘I know you admire Shakespeare above all other writers’.

‘I do’, I said. ‘And I have to agree with my friend the Artist, that his work comes to us from a very different world. A world of Nature rather than Science; where things were made by hand, not by machine; where men worked in the fields not in factories. I am no Luddite, but when I read Shakespeare, I cannot help feeling some nostalgia for the Forest of Arden, for Queen Mab, for the melodious magic of Midsummer’s Eve. For the world we have lost. Shakespeare was not for an age, but for all time’.

‘I see our friend is away with the fairies!’ said the Scientist. ‘Shakespeare was a man of the people. He wrote about human life in his own time, and his plays were performed for the entertainment and edification of those same people. He was the Charles Dickens of his day’.

‘Why no’, I broke in. ‘There is no comparison. Shakespeare wrote for the court, for the Queen and the nobles. He was of the elite, not the masses. His patron was the Earl of Southampton. His company became the King’s Men under James I. Popularity is irrelevant. His art survives because it was of the finest quality, not because of the number of copies he sold!’

‘Gentlemen’, said the Time Traveller, ‘thank you all for your suggestions. I will endeavour to pursue them, if it is in any way possible. But now I must bid you good night, for I have some work to finish before I will be able to sleep. Come again tomorrow evening, all of you, to see me off’.

And so the party broke up. As hats and sticks were handed round, and goodbyes were being said in the hall, the Time Traveller signalled to me to linger behind the others. After they left, with a conspiratorial smile he led me back down the steps to the laboratory.

Ω

But let my narrative travel back in time a little, to explain the context of this conversation. I had rushed down to Richmond as soon as I heard of the Time Traveller’s return. The last I had seen of him, three years before, was that momentary, fleeting glimpse of a transparent figure in the process of vanishing into futurity, that uncertain vision I tried to describe in my previous narrative. I had opened the laboratory door: there was a gust of air, a sound of breaking

glass, and the Time Traveller was no longer there. The room was empty, save for a subsiding stir of dust.

I waited with wonder and anxiety for his return, imagining all the fates that might have befallen him on his long unpredictable voyage: whether he had perished under a blood-red, expiring sun, on some forlorn, apocalyptic shore; or found his true happiness among enlightened citizens of some utopian future. Imagine my feelings, then, when I received an invitation to dinner, signed with his own familiar hand, and delivered without comment, as if nothing had happened!

It was with mixed emotions, therefore, that I pushed open the gate of the house on Richmond Hill, one mild summer evening in 1903, and with no little trepidation, pulled at the doorbell. Almost throwing my hat and stick at the old manservant, I took the steps down to the laboratory two at a time, and burst in on a familiar scene. There was the Time Traveller, his face as pale as I recalled it, his hair now as grey as his eyes, standing in front of what appeared to be a modified version of his Time Machine. He was in the midst of explaining its properties to three other guests, none of whom I knew. He greeted me cordially, but with a certain rueful air, as if knowing his unexplained absence merited some measure of contrition. I was the only member of the party who had been privy to his previous adventures in time, and had already heard the strange, haunting tale of his journey to the future.

‘How long have you been back?’ I asked, muting my annoyance in deference to the presence of other guests.

‘Oh, some while’, he said offhandedly. ‘I’ve had time for little but this’. And he gestured towards the Machine.

‘So you say you have travelled in time’, asked the Journalist, ‘before, on such a machine?’

‘Yes’, said the Time Traveller, as if wanting to play down his previous adventures, ‘but in a very experimental way. I wanted merely to prove that it could be done. There were many associated problems, and not a few risks. I had very little control over the machine’s movements in space, and no means of storing it safely on my arrival. Why, at one point in my travels, I almost lost it altogether, which would have left me helplessly stranded in the future!’ Here he glanced at me, tacitly sharing our common secret of the Time Machine’s

sojourn behind the bronze doors of the White Sphinx, during its capture by the Morlocks.

The machine looked much the same to me, with what looked like some minor modifications. It had the same spherical structure of curved metal bars, the same intricate interconnection of rods and levers, fashioned from ivory and quartz. The saddle had been enlarged, and between the handlebars, the dials indicating the date seemed more elaborate. Above them I noted a new addition, a screen with what looked like a map of London.

The dinner-gong now resounded through the house, and we trooped upstairs and ate our meal quickly, in a silence of expectation.

‘Let’s talk outside’, said the Time Traveller, and led us into his meticulously-kept garden, with splendid views of the valley of the Thames. Always the attentive host, the Time Traveller made sure all his guests were comfortable with brandy and cigars, before re-opening the conversation.

‘What are your intentions, then’, asked the Scientist, ‘with this new machine?’

‘So far, said the Time Traveller, carefully looking at the residue of ash on the end of his cigar, ‘I have travelled only into the future. My ambition now is to journey into the past’.

‘The past?’ I exclaimed.

‘Yes’, said the Time Traveller, ‘the past. If I can move through time in one direction, I can move in the other. In principle, the journey should entail less risk, since by definition we know more of the past than we do of the future. The problems are technical, rather than theoretical’.

‘What are they?’ asked the Journalist.

‘They are physical. When I first ventured to travel into the future, I was particularly concerned with the interactions of time and space. Suppose my machine met with material obstacles in its temporal transit? My theory was that the velocity of time travel would attenuate the machine, so that I would slip like a vapour through the intervening substances. But to come to rest would involve jamming the machine and myself, molecule by molecule, into whatever lay in my way, and I had no idea what reaction that might cause. Might I not find myself inside a stone wall? In practice I found that time and space have some kind of intimate relationship with one another, such that I have coined a new

term for its interdependence – space-time. Space-time has its own housekeeping rules, which do not permit two bodies to occupy the same physical space simultaneously. In whatever time I may happen to arrive in one particular place, space-time has already ensured the possibility of such an event, and thereby prohibited any destructive collision with another body. One day we will understand why. For the moment we can only be grateful for nature's providence.

'Now my original aspiration was to build a machine that would carry its operator indifferently in any direction of Space and Time. In practice I have moved only in Time, and did not attempt to navigate the other dimensions. Time travel was a blind, reckless, hurling of oneself into the void, and there was neither the opportunity nor the will to alter my position in space. But now I am confident that the speed of time travel eliminates the resistance of the material environment, I have no doubt that movement in space may also be accomplished'.

'But how can you navigate in space when abstracted from it by the mechanics of time travel?'

'A good question', he acknowledged. 'Yes, the Time Machine retains its materiality, although its molecules are reconfigured in flight. It is still subject to gravity, for instance, or the earth in its rotation would slip away from beneath it. But there is a way I do not yet fully understand of using Time to manoeuvre in Space. There are vectors in Time, just as the air has its currents, and using measurements taken from experiments in manned flight, I believe it possible to sail on them. The difficulty is knowing where you are! I have invented a device which uses electromagnetic waves to position an object in space. It transmits a signal to the nearest heavenly body – in our case the moon, of course – and receives it when it bounces back. The angle of incidence will tell me how far I have travelled from a fixed point, and in what direction. The result shows as a still or moving point on a map'. And he pointed to the screen at the front of the machine.

'Ingenious!' said the Scientist. 'A development of the Astrolabe'.

'Exactly so. And just as such instruments enabled our forefathers to discover new worlds on the other side of the globe, so mine will facilitate the exploration of time – and in due course, of Outer Space'.

It was then that he began to inquire of us as to what should be his destination.

Ω

And so it came about that once again I was standing in the Time Traveller's laboratory. The machine stood between us, quietly awaiting the signal that would send it rushing into the past.

'I really was concerned about you', I said, hurt by his prolonged absence incognito. 'I thought I would never see you again'.

'And I am truly sorry, my young friend,' was his reply, 'to have kept you in the dark. On the next occasion I will return to a point in time before I leave, and forewarn you of what is to come'.

'But where did you go?'

'Everywhere. This time I did not linger to have my machine stolen and my life attempted, but concentrated on studying the mechanics of time travel. I returned possessed of the key to many of its mysteries, and could think of nothing but applying my new knowledge to its practical problems. Only now am I fully equipped to travel again'.

'Now? But you said you were not yet ready'.

'An exaggeration. The machine is prepared. I wanted only some pointers as to where I should go. There is no point in organising a formal launch, when I can easily return to the moment before it happened! No, my plan is to go tonight, and to return to the 17th century. Everything is ready'.

I looked ruefully at the machine. The thought that my companion would see the sun rise on Shakespeare's London filled me with envy. He looked at me and seemed to understand.

'I see you are anxious to find the solution to our controversy', he said. 'We certainly have enough questions to pursue. Was Shakespeare an Ancient, or a Modern? A conservative, or a radical? Did he write to bring back an old world, or to usher in a new? Did he write for the people, or the court? Did he stand for Art, or for Science?'

I confessed that I could wish for nothing more than to have the answers to such questions.

'Then', said the Time Traveller, quickly. 'Come with me'.

'With you?' I exclaimed. 'But ...'

‘The machine can carry two. I constructed a pillion, as I thought I might need an assistant. Are you afraid?’

Of course I was, but I denied it. ‘Now? Tonight?’

‘Yes’, he said, impatiently. ‘We can return to this very moment, and afterwards you can go home and sleep in your own bed. But first, do you not want to meet Shakespeare?’

My resistance melted under his exhortations, and I resolved to travel with him. Immediately he bestrode the machine, and began to make adjustments to his dials.

‘*Hamlet*, I think you said? That would be around 1600’.

‘1603 was the year *Hamlet* was first published’.

‘Very well. Observe how I can target our destination exactly, using my positioning system. The Globe Theatre. The southerly bank of the Thames, close to what is now the Iron Bridge. We are ready. Hop on!’

Wasting no more time, I slung a leg over the machine and sat behind him. He touched a lever, and we were off.

Ω

Although the Traveller had described in some detail the unpleasant sensations associated with travelling through Time, a helpless headlong motion, I was still unprepared for an experience that felt like nothing less than flinging oneself into a void. There was also, in addition, a violent buffeting of turbulence he had not mentioned in his previous narrative, that I assumed arose from the machine’s simultaneous transit through space. I expected to observe the track of our passage in the changing landscape, but there was nothing to see in that grey, opaque limbo of non-existence, suspended between Space and Time. Suddenly, after only a few minutes, I felt the Time Traveller activate some instrument of deceleration, and the machine jolted to an abrupt stop.

We came to rest in the darkness, under a canopy of trees. Through their black branches I could glimpse moonlight, and not far off the yellow lights of a high-road.

‘Where are we?’ I asked, dismounting the machine. ‘And when?’

‘1851’, he replied. ‘Where, I’m not sure. We were travelling slightly off course and I had to stop to correct the deviation. I think we are in Hyde Park’.

He was bent over the machine trying to see his instruments, but by this time I had turned around, and was astonished at what I saw.

‘Are you sure?’ I asked.

‘Yes’, he said, ‘no doubt. See, there is the Round Pond. And yonder is Kensington Palace’.

‘No. About the date, I mean. If this is Hyde Park, what on earth is that?’

In the direction of the road, where I expected to see the spire of the Albert Memorial, I beheld a vast structure, surmounted by a great curved roof, apparently composed entirely of glass. It was larger than any building I had ever seen: well over a hundred feet in height and easily a third of a mile long. The bright moonlight reflected brilliantly from millions of panes of glass. I thought it must be one of those buildings of the future of which the Time Traveller had spoken, and I feared he had taken me forward to the time of the Eloi and the Morlocks.

‘Why that’ he exclaimed ‘is a miracle of modern engineering. How could I have missed the significance? 1851! It is the Crystal Palace!’

‘The Crystal Palace! Then we are in Sydenham?’

‘No, no. The Crystal Palace was erected in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition of 1851, and relocated later to Kent’.

‘Can we take a closer look at it?’

‘We can do more than that. We are only a few years back in time, in the age of our own parents. We will not excite attention: our clothes will seem little different from those of an ordinary working man. Before we resume our journey, we will be the first men to return from the future, and visit the Great Exhibition’.

‘But what of the Time Machine? Where will you hide it?’

‘Observe’, he said, with that slightly mischievous air he assumed when about to demonstrate another of his inventions. From his pocket he drew what looked like a stop watch, set the dial, pointed it, and pressed a button. The machine trembled a little, grew faint and disappeared.

‘What have you done?’ I gasped.

‘Have no fear’, he said. ‘I have sent the machine a few minutes into the future, where it will remain close, but utterly invisible to the present. When we wish to re-board, this remote control device will bring it back into our own time again’.

‘Don’t lose it!’ I said fervently.

For a few hours of darkness we rested on a park bench, and at first light ventured into Kensington to find some breakfast. On the road we found the little green hut of the Cabman’s Stand, where we able to buy coffee and drink it in a dense atmosphere of thick smoke, frying onions and loud conversation. Then we returned to the park, and approached the Crystal Palace. As we walked past the ornamental pond with its fountains, the Time Traveller spoke reverently of the great building’s history.

‘You know he was a gardener, Paxton, designer of the Palace? A landscaper at Chatsworth. But he made use of new techniques in construction, combining wood, plate glass and cast iron, to design the great conservatory there. Have you seen the Chatsworth Lily House? Erected to house the *Amazonica*. A building with roof and walls of light. He used cast plate glass with a curtain wall system, so vertical bays of glass could be hung from cantilevered beams. That was his invention, and the basis for the construction of the Crystal Palace. Paxton said that the ribbed floating leaves of the giant Amazonian lily were his inspiration for this design. What a perfect marriage of art and nature! Of science and imagination!’

‘Of architecture and engineering’, I added, marvelling at the airy lightness of the huge building, and the delicacy of its crystalline structure.

‘Yes. It must have been Brunel who saw its promise. You know he was on the selection committee that picked the design? In any event, he imitated the method, when he redesigned Paddington Station, and used the same construction company. Brunel now: he was a true visionary. A man of immense imagination, with the practical knowledge to realize his dreams’.

At the entrance the clerk looked curiously at our modern shillings, but allowed us in without comment. I believe he thought we were foreigners. We entered the building, and marvelled at both its structure and its contents. It was indeed a ‘Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations’. Everything was

there, from countries all around the world, and from every discipline and field of art, manufacture, engineering, industry. There were jewels, and locks, and furniture, and daguerrotypes, and revolvers, and kitchen appliances, and sculptures, and cups, and barometers, and musical instruments. Ironwork from Shropshire, pots from Derby, a voting machine from Sussex, a reaping machine from America. Products from every new process, artefacts from every time and place. A Jacquard loom stood next to a statue of Anubis; here was a steam-hammer, there a gold howdah on a huge stuffed elephant.

‘I think I see what I was looking for’, said the Time Traveller, and threaded his way through the crowd that was gradually filling up the immense pavilion. He led me to a beautiful wrought-iron canopy standing right beneath the central dome of the Palace, which sheltered beneath its elaborate artistry a white plaster effigy of Shakespeare, copied from the statue in Westminster Abbey. The dome was a kind of cupola, fashioned from delicate traceries of wrought iron, exquisitely curved into an inverted flower-like shape. Slim iron columns supported the dome, each one surmounted by a perching eagle. At the apex a cylindrical chimney tapered into a kind of spire, topped by a weather-vane and a figure of Eros. Somehow the heavy iron structure managed to assume an effect of lightness, the iron seeming as fragile as lace, and easily mistaken for a garden trellis threaded with clambering flowers.

‘The dome is from Coalbrookdale’, said the Time Traveller. ‘You know the scientific history, of course: how Abraham Darby made advances in the smelting of iron, using coke as fuel. How his company built the first iron bridge. This work of theirs takes pride of place here: a perfect synthesis of beauty and industry, of art and manufacture’.

I could hardly not be impressed by this interweaving of art and industry, metallurgy and imagination. ‘It reminds me of the Eiffel Tower’, I exclaimed. ‘The same latticework of iron, the same organic form’.

A gentleman who was making a close study of the canopy looked at me curiously.

‘Keep your voice down’, whispered the Time Traveller. ‘Remember we’re in 1851! Let us hope that man lives another fifty years, so he can see the Eiffel Tower for himself. It will surprise him to remember when he first heard about it. But here, at any rate, is one image of Shakespeare for you, at the very centre of

the exhibition your hero William Morris refused to enter! Does he not look entirely at home?’

I owned that he did, and that here in this miraculous glass palace, modelled on the leaves of a lily; constructed by means of the most advanced engineering technology; at the heart of a Great Exhibition that gave equal emphasis to art and industry - the figure of Shakespeare seemed in no way out of place. By now a crowd had gathered, and we were able to observe the diverse and colourful throng of spectators that gathered and circled around the monument’s base. A gentleman in top-hat, mutton-chop whiskers, frock coat and white trousers, the very image of Victorian respectability, was explaining its form to two men from Persia, dressed in brilliant red, blue and yellow costumes, with baggy trousers and white turbans. There was a man in blue naval officer’s uniform with gold-braided cocked hat, his bonneted wife on his arm. Two little girls in frocks sat casually at the monument’s base, poring over a printed catalogue. The elaborate flowered costumes and coolie hats of imperial China complemented the flowing robes and turbans of India. A stout Englishman in brown broadcloth and gaiters stood and stared at the monument with the ingrained truculence of a farmer.

This colourful and cosmopolitan throng skirted the frontal base of the statue. We walked around the back, and were there confronted by a very different scene. Here a large group of common people stood and sat around, completely at their leisure beneath the Bard’s avuncular gaze. A red-faced woman, basket at her feet, held out a glass to be filled with wine by an equally rubicund man. Two soldiers in shakos flirted loudly with a couple of pretty country girls. There were children everywhere: a small boy with his father’s hand-me-down hat slipping over his ears; a little girl holding wool for her busily knitting mother; and at the centre of the pedestal, a nursing mother suckled her baby at her breast, her own mother looking indulgently on.

‘All human life is here’, said the Time Traveller, ‘gathered together under Shakespeare’s masterful shadow’.

“‘One touch of nature’”, I quoted, “‘makes the whole world kin’”.

‘Indeed. And there is the answer to one of our questions, at least for this time and for this place. There is no separation here between Shakespeare and the common people. Moreover, they themselves are enfolded within a cosmopolitan gathering of all nations, the focal point of which is the image of Shakespeare. Your quotation is very apt. But do you know what Prince Albert said was the

ultimate purpose of the Great Exhibition? To bring closer “that great end, to which all history points – the realisation of the unity of mankind”.

As the place gradually began to fill with more and more visitors, we thought it best to make our exit. It was a short walk across the park to the clump of trees where we had left the Time Machine. He pressed a button on his remote control, and the machine materialized out of thin air a few yards away.

‘We will stop here again on the way back’, he said, adjusting his instruments. ‘There is more to be seen. The device will memorise this exact point in space and time, like a grid reference on a map’.

People turned to look at us, but showed little curiosity, imagining the machine, I suppose, to be yet another ingenious invention from the technological cornucopia of the Great Exhibition. In any case we were aboard and away in a matter of seconds.

Again there was that sensation of dropping like a stone into the vortex of time, and the violent clubbing force of space pushing us back on track. On this occasion the Time Traveller seemed confident of his navigation, and we held our course for what seemed like a long duration. As we began to decelerate, I could see the years receding more slowly on the spinning dials, counting down to our target date of 1603.

And we were there. I almost leapt from the machine, in eagerness to enter this so hallowed and so gracious time. The Time Traveller reset his dials back to 1851 again, and alighted. Preparing to cache the machine into the future, he turned and looked around. What we both saw gave us pause, and immediately suspended our aspirations to dwell for very long in Shakespeare’s London.

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We stood on the bank of the river, surrounded by all those famous historical monuments so carefully chronicled in the engravings of Visscher and Hollar: London Bridge, the old St Paul’s, and the Globe Theatre itself, standing squat and round next to the bear-baiting arena. But something was out of joint. The waters of the Thames ran sluggish and grey, its surface covered in floating debris. There was a strange ominous hush. Not a soul was abroad, though the morning was well advanced. Everywhere a sweet sickly smell clung to everything, an odour of decay. Beyond the thatched roofs of the clustering

houses, plumes of smoke from bonfires smudged the horizon. From an open window there came the thin cry of a new-born child. Otherwise there was no sound of a human presence. A scattering of white dust hung limply in the air.

Instinctively we stuck close to the machine, afraid of this inhospitable environment. The doors of the theatre frowned shut. Nearby an indescribably filthy old man was rummaging through a pile of rubbish.

‘Good day’, I greeted him.

He snarled at me like a wild animal disturbed over its prey, then looked us up and down with contempt. ‘Foreigners’, he spat.

‘Is the theatre open?’

‘Theatre’s close’.

‘Why?’

He looked at me, and began to laugh softly. ‘Why?’ he repeated.

‘Yes, why?’

He opened a mouth full of carious teeth. ‘Plague’.

We had unwittingly chosen a bad year to revisit Jacobean London, and I wished I had thought more carefully when asked to choose a date. Immediately we climbed back on the machine. Not only would we have no resistance to the dreadful bubonic bacillus: worse, we could contract the disease, and return to our own time as carriers of a devastating infection. The old man stared at us without curiosity. After all he had seen, I imagine it would have been no surprise to him to behold Ezekiel’s chariot, riding the whirlwind through that smitten, pestilential city.

Ω

We made haste to leave that dreadful place behind us. As the Traveller started the machine, I noticed him accidentally nudge one of the dials controlling the date, changing the ‘8’ to a ‘9’. But it was too late to warn him, and we were away. With no spatial relocation, time travel was almost tolerable. The Traveller seemed not to notice the altered date, and we had soon overshot our target. But as we approached 1951, we became aware of some cataclysmic activity in the space-time continuum. Dull percussions reached us, attenuated but cacophonous, as if a massive devastating force were obliterating the world

outside. I feared we might become victims of some apocalyptic event, but the noise of destruction soon ceased, and we coasted easily enough to our destination, and touched down gently in 1951.

I explained to my companion how the error of timing had occurred. Apprehensively we looked around, but the world seemed peaceful enough, though recently ravaged by a terrible disaster. Along the banks of the Thames we saw the marks of devastation, ruined buildings, piles of rubble.

‘What caused this’, I wondered. ‘Earthquake?’

‘No’, said the Time Traveller thoughtfully. ‘I think not. I foresaw something very like this, and wrote a paper on it. I believe this is the result of war from the air. Of aerial bombardment. The city has endured terrible punishment from a ruthless enemy, equipped with weapons of mass destruction’.

Still the marks of devastation were perhaps not so recent: flourishing vegetation sprang and clustered among the ruins, and everywhere we could see signs of clearance and reconstruction. We hid the machine, and walked upstream towards Westminster. Across the Thames, the dome of St Paul’s still stood proudly, though its neighbourhood was in ruins. We walked beneath the Charing Cross railway bridge, and my companion pointed out the old brick piles preserved from Brunel’s original structure.

‘Brunel again’, he said. ‘Is there no escape from that man’s genius?’

The old Strand Bridge had obviously been recently replaced by a new structure, apparently now known as Waterloo Bridge. As we walked towards Westminster Bridge, we began to realize that something unusual was taking place here. Crowds of people in holiday mood were converging on the south bank of the river, and everywhere pennants and bunting, brightly-coloured posters and hoardings, heralded some great celebration or festival. It did not take us long to realize that, by a fortuitous error of navigation, we had stumbled upon the first anniversary of the Great Exhibition, and that its name was the Festival of Britain.

As we rounded the bend of the river, we were confronted by a breath-taking collection of buildings, some temporary and some permanent, evidently erected for the festival. One in particular stood out as an extraordinary construction in a modern, Scandinavian style, a great concert hall with a tall glazed facade and a curved roof, its name emblazoned on the front as the ‘Royal Festival Hall’. A

high and slender shape, the 'Skylon', somewhere between a cigar and a rocket, hung suspended in the air with no visible means of support. Other buildings included an enormous dome, in the shape artists have imagined to belong to alien spacecraft, and a very tall vertical barn-like building with a timber trussed roof of oak that swept and curved upwards at the sides, and a façade all of glass, named 'the Lion and the Unicorn'. Threading our way through the crowds, we wandered into this latter building, which was an exhibition space telling the story of the British people. A large mural depicted scenes from British history, and the exhibition itself documented the history of our institutions, parliament and the law and the church. We were pleased to find, in pride of place, a copy of the First Folio of Shakespeare's works, alongside a King James Bible.

This positioning of Shakespeare as part of the constitutional history of Britain seemed, however, somewhat conventional, and there was little interest in it from the crowds of visitors who streamed through the building.

'Perhaps our Shakespeare is no longer at the heart of the British character', suggested the Time Traveller, 'if he is only a book among books'.

We exited the building, and walked over to a spot where a crowd of people were gathered, staring up at a steam locomotive that stood on display beneath a temporary covering. The engine was in many ways little different from the trains we knew, but it was much more beautifully designed, with clean lines and a stylish finish. The wheels were more discreet, half-concealed inside the bodywork, while the tall chimney stack we were used to had been flattened to give the locomotive a smooth, aerodynamic look. It was painted a bright green, with a black front that bore a green shield decorated with the words 'Golden Arrow', and below a bright red bumper. An actual golden arrow slanted diagonally across the shield in what seemed to us a very avant-garde, asymmetrical gesture. Altogether the machine was a beautiful piece of design engineering, sleek and classic in its lines, bright and modern in its decoration, exuding a quiet and confident sense of power. It was basically the same machine, the steam locomotive invented by Stephenson over a century before, yet in terms of craftsmanship, design quality and engineering precision it seemed to us miraculous.

But a surprise lay in store for us, as we moved around with the admiring crowd. We observed that some of them were pointing up at a red name-plate, riveted to the side of the locomotive, and laughing with pleasure amongst themselves. Peering over their heads to see what was stimulating them, we realized that we

had once again stumbled upon the object of our quest. The locomotive was named 'William Shakespeare'.

“'Britannia Class no. 70004, William Shakespeare'”, the Traveller read from an expository placard. 'So here he is again, back where he belongs, at the centre of public attention. And at the cutting edge of modern technology and design'.

Ω

At last we felt it was time to be on our way. We returned to the spot where we had left the machine, full of admiration for the evidence we had seen of British scientific and technological development, especially after years of a cruel and destructive war; and delighted to have found proof that Shakespeare remained not only central to British culture, but intimately bound up with the principal social and economic drivers of the day, industry, engineering and design. My curiosity about the future was only increased by our sojourn in 1951, so I was delighted when the Time Traveller indicated a willingness to attempt one more progressive cycle.

'Why don't we go further forward, and see if Shakespeare figures as largely in the second anniversary of the Great Exhibition?' he said. 'Have a look at Shakespeare 2051?'

I agreed with alacrity, and he set his dials for that date. I had another idea. 'Suppose we shift our physical location, and visit Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, in 2051? It will be interesting to see what has happened to the old town'.

No sooner said than done. The Traveller used a kind of keyboard fitted to his map to enter the place-name 'Stratford', and once again we committed ourselves to a journey through time and space. After a brief period of motion, involving some little relocation, the machine seemed to slow itself down, as if reluctant to proceed any further. The dials showed that we were past the second millennium, but there seemed to be some obstacle inhibiting us from voyaging any further than 2012. The machine stopped in that year, in a clump of trees by a river. The Traveller sat staring at his instruments, and scratching his head.

‘I don’t understand’, he said. ‘Something is preventing us from proceeding further. The continuum seems to end here. We seem to be locked inside a paradigm, and have reached its outer limit. It is almost as if we are caught in a temporal narrative that is only being written at this time, and has no perspective on the future’.

‘But we have been travelling into the future’, I said.

‘Our tomorrow’, he retorted, ‘but someone else’s yesterday. The machine cannot see beyond 2012, and so we are held here, like characters imprisoned in an author’s past’.

‘An author? But who is writing the story?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never believed in God. And where are we? The map shows we’ve travelled only a few miles north-east. I don’t think we’re in Stratford-upon-Avon’.

That much was obvious, as we peered out from our hiding place. The light was fading towards dusk. We stood in a small wooded riverside area, hidden from view, so no-one had witnessed our arrival. But this was no more than a little landscaped seclusion, part of a much larger public space that was a concourse for literally thousands of people. We were in an enormous park, full of huge buildings, seemingly constructed for sporting events. Prominent among them was an immense stadium, tall and circular, engineered with outstanding ingenuity, and exquisitely designed. Gradually, as darkness began to fall, innumerable coloured lights, set into intricate patterns, began to illuminate the structure, forming varying patterns and shapes, so what had been a large building turned into a fantasy palace of glowing vermilion. We had never seen so much power, generated presumably from electricity, and applied to such subtle and aesthetically thrilling purposes.

We hid the machine, and walked towards the stadium. After a few brief observations, the Time Traveller said: ‘I know where we are. We should have given the machine more precise instruction. This is Stratford in London’s East End!’

I was concerned that we would be detected, since the fashions of clothing had changed enormously, and we stood out in our anachronistic dress. But as we approached the building, suddenly we found ourselves part of a large throng of people, all dressed in various fashions of the past, from the Middle Ages up to

our own time. We were able to fall in with a group of men, clad in authentic 19th century costume, who seemed to be on their way to a game of cricket. Filing along with them, we remained unnoticed, and were thus able to gain access to the interior of the stadium.

Once inside, our astonishment only increased. The stadium was a huge arena, with raked seating holding what looked like 100,000 people. The round competition or performance space was filled with what appeared to be a landscaped area of bright green grass, at its centre a mound or tumulus surmounted by an oak tree. The lighting inside the arena was even more brilliant and impressive than its exterior illumination. We soon realised that our costumed companions must in fact be actors in a show about to commence, so as they approached the stage we stepped aside, and ensconced ourselves in two empty seats at the rear of the auditorium.

As we seated ourselves, we heard the announcement that told us where we were: the venue of the 30th Olympic Games. We had known only two Olympiads, of course, in Athens in 1896 and Paris in 1900. Evidently the custom had been continued every four years ever since. This was the opening ceremony. The show that unfolded before us, involving hundreds of actors and as many musicians, was nothing less than a history of Britain. The bright green sward, with its towering mound that bore a resemblance to Glastonbury Tor, represented mediaeval England, a pre-industrial landscape of fields and villages, meadows and woods. Smoke rose from the chimney of a thatched cottage. Actors playing the roles of rural labourers tilled the fields or played games, kicking a ball or dancing round a maypole. Our friends the cricketers, who had helped us to enter incognito, played their game with impressive earnestness on the village green. All the while a sweet child's voice sang William Blake's poem 'And did those feet' from *Jerusalem*, a nostalgic celebration of England's green and pleasant land, as yet unblighted by the dark satanic mills.

It was difficult to comprehend everything being played before us, as the arena was so vast, and we were surrounded by an immense battery of lights, and a great wall of sound, voices and music, the source of which we could not identify. Huge screens projected above the rim of the arena, showing what appeared to be gigantic moving photographs of distant scenes. But presently some significant historical change was foreshadowed, when an old omnibus drawn by two shire horses entered the arena, and deposited a group of men who wore the top hats and frock coats of Victorian capitalists. One of them, who seemed to be *primus inter pares*, strode ahead of the group, carrying a book. We

realised immediately that this actor was representing none other than Isambard Kingdom Brunel himself. But to our surprise, he stood on the mound, and in a ringing declamatory voice spoke Caliban's lines from *The Tempest*:

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
 Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
 That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
 The clouds methought would open, and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked,
 I cried to dream again.

As he spoke, splendidly from that unseen source rose music, grand and melancholy, growing in crescendo to a paean that filled the arena. But this was no modern music, but an anthem from our own time! We recognised it instantly as Elgar's 'Nimrod', which I had myself heard premiered at St James's Hall in 1899. Evidently the music of our own day was not only still popular, but regarded as a quintessential *leitmotif* of the British sensibility.

There followed an extraordinary performed history of the Industrial Revolution. The rural populace began to drift away, while by some invisible technology the great oak tree on the summit of the mound rose into the air, revealing beneath its roots a pit emitting smoke and light. From this breach in the rural landscape there began to stream myriads of industrial workers, ragged with poverty and dirty with toil. Under the beneficent gaze of Brunel and his band of entrepreneurs, the working masses occupied the arena, beginning to roll up the green carpet of grass, and remove it to disclose hard surfaces of metal or glass. Fences were planted to represent land enclosure. Women and men were seen hauling laboriously at machines that somehow, to our astonishment, triggered from the ground tall factory chimneys, six in number, that rose into the air and belched forth the smoke and steam of industrial production. Brunel strode cheerfully through the midst of this immense social upheaval, surveying the apparently infinite capability of human labour.

By now the green grass of rural England had disappeared, replaced by a brownfield industrial site full of machinery: a water wheel, beam engines, looms. And then came the most incredible theatrical manifestation I had ever seen. At the centre of the display I had noticed a large circular trough, linked by

a long channel to a crucible that put me in mind of steel production. Now before our very eyes that same smelting process seemed to begin, with what looked like a sparking river of molten steel pouring into the channel, and slowly making its way towards the central trough. Steelworkers busily hammered and sieved the glowing ore. In truth the display was manufactured by a combination of light effects and fireworks; but no more convincing simulation of smelting has, I am sure, ever before or since been done on a stage. Running around the trough, the molten steel appeared to form a perfect ring. Above our heads, we noticed, four identical rings of light were hovering suspended in the air, slowly converging towards one another. The ring that had shaped itself in the centre also rose and moved towards the others. In a dazzling technological *coup d'oeil*, these five rings, that seemed to have the mass and density of metal, yet hovered ethereally in the air, effortlessly combined together to form an image, which then seemed to burst into flame, and cascade showers of brilliant sparks down into the space of the auditorium.

‘The symbol of the Olympics’, said the Time Traveller, gazing up with something like awe at the interlacing rings. ‘Pierre de Coubertin showed me his design. Derived from an ancient Greek hieroglyph. All the nations of the world, linked together in peaceful competition. It is wonderful’.

‘Man has a bright future, then, at least for a hundred years or so’.

‘And one in which our own time is remembered and revered. The hero of this show is none other than Brunel!’

‘Yet the only words he spoke were from Shakespeare’.

‘Yes. What do you make of that?’

A pretty young girl in a seat next to the Time Traveller overheard his question and said helpfully ‘It’s from *The Tempest*. We did it at school’.

Like many other members of the audience, the girl held in her hand a small oblong machine that clearly interested the Time Traveller. I had observed her entering writing onto a screen, as if sending messages. Now however she pressed her fingers onto the device, and conjured up for us on the screen a tiny image of the actor playing Brunel, speaking Shakespeare’s lines.

‘May I?’ asked the Time Traveller, and took the device from her hand.

‘Lumiere would be interested to see this’, he said thoughtfully.

‘You can keep it’, said the girl. ‘It’s only a Pay-as-you-go. I’ve got a contract phone’.

‘I’m sure you have’, he said, concealing his incomprehension. But I saw him slide the device quickly into his pocket, before she changed her mind. I noticed two ushers pointing at us, and talking to one another. We both felt it was time for us to move on, though the show was continuing. We slipped out the way we had come in, and returned to the spot where we had left the Time Machine.

‘Why do you think they used those lines of Shakespeare?’ My companion asked as we walked. ‘From Caliban to Brunel? Brunel was no dreamer, and certainly no primitive man’.

‘I’ve been reflecting on it’, I replied, ‘and think I have the answer. We have just witnessed the same creative conjunction of Shakespeare with industry and engineering that we saw in the Great Exhibition, and in the Festival of Britain. Caliban lived in a wondrous isle, surrounded by the shapes of his imagination. He was an instinctive artist, a poet and a dreamer. He heard random noise as exquisite music, and when he looked at the sky, he saw the clouds open onto infinite possibility.

‘Brunel too lived in an isle of wonders, and heard the same music. He listened to the random babbling of nature, and interpreted it into a common language. He dreamed the same dreams: dreams of space and time. And what he dreamed, he invented: his mind and hand went together. His imagination reached out across distance, abbreviated time and annihilated space, crossed rivers and linked towns, burrowed deep into the earth, and rode the pitching waves of the high seas. And from those visions, he conjured machines that made dreams into reality: bridges, ships, railways.

‘This we knew already. But what we have seen here tonight, takes Brunel’s machinery, and renders it back into dream again. The technology of 2012 far surpasses that of our own day, and is capable not only of construction, but of creation. Engineering has entered the realm of poetry. Art and science have become one, as they were in the Renaissance. And so Shakespeare and Brunel no longer stand opposed, as the dreamer and the artisan, or the poet and the engineer. They have become one voice, one hand, one mind. And by the combination of their powers of vision and practice, they have kept Britain great, or perhaps made it great again’.

We retrieved the machine, and prepared to bid farewell to the future, and return to the past. I thought we would be going straight home, but the Time Traveller was thoughtful, studying the device the girl had given him.

‘Let’s have one more try at finding Shakespeare’, he said quickly. ‘I’d like to show him this. So he can see how his words will live on in the future’.

And we were away again. Accustomed by now to time travel, its sensations had become tolerable. The Traveller has obviously perfected his directional instruments, and steered the machine confidently back to Southwark, this time to the less perilous date of 1599, and a time around late morning. Elizabethan London now seemed a much more normal place, with the sun breaking through clouds, early risers going about their business, and the river gliding at its own sweet will. Smoke rose from chimneys, sounds of children and smells of cooking came from open windows. We hid the machine, and asked at the door of the theatre if there was to be a play that day. The answer was unfortunately negative, so we inquired into the whereabouts of Master William Shakespeare. We would find him, we were told, later in the day, along the river at the George and Dragon Inn.

So we walked along to the old high street, our clothes courting curious glances, but no interference, as the district was a favourite haunt of foreigners. We found the old inn easily enough - it remains there still - and entered its grey cobbled yard. Inside we were able to purchase food and drink with a small silver coin I happened to find in my pocket. A few rough-looking characters eyed us, but gave us no trouble. We waited, and as the hours passed, people came and went, workers, servants, apprentices, gentlemen, soldiers, players, prostitutes, taking a drink and going about their business. We sat watching in fascination the colourful pageant of Shakespeare’s London. Before our very eyes appeared the contemporary originals of Shakespeare’s dramatic characters: that angry young man had a touch of Hotspur; the lean and slippered pantaloone resembled Justice Shallow; there was Doll Tearsheet, and around her a whole crowd of fat, red-faced and boisterous Falstaffs.

But Shakespeare himself never appeared. The little communications device the Traveller had brought back from the future seemed to stop working, its display showing a warning of ‘no signal’. We had lost our link to the future, and no-one was expecting us in the past. As the light began to fail we gave up, and returned to the Time Machine. Silently, not without a tinge of disappointment, we recovered the machine, re-boarded and returned to our own time.

Ω

Everything was as we had left it. The laboratory remained silent and undisturbed. The clock on the wall told us that no time at all had elapsed since we embarked on that incredible journey.

‘If you hurry, you’ll still catch the last train’, he said to me in a strangely matter-of-fact way. ‘But come tomorrow night, won’t you, to help me convince the others that I’m neither mad, nor an inveterate liar!’

As I walked towards the station, down the hill into the little town, quotidian reality encroached and pressed upon me, claiming me for this time, and this place. The hissing of gas lamps along the street; low laughter of lovers in the nearby park; the distant sigh of a train from over the hill, making its way to Kingston. Yet in my mind, all this was fractured and transected by an unavoidable awareness of other times, and other places; of lives long gone, yet still inexplicably present; of ages still unknown, yet into which, against all laws of nature, I had already travelled. All our yesterdays remaining to be revisited; tomorrow as easily accessible as today. Was I here, or there, or elsewhere? Did those street-lamps illuminate a flare-path to the future? Was that whispering I could hear from over the low wall, a lover and his lass, an echo from the past? Would my train really take me only a few miles away in space, back to a humdrum, imprisoning present?

Be not afraid, I said to myself. The isle is full of noises. Everything is still there, if our dreams are true enough: all that is past, and passing, and to come. I had no idea whether I was still dreaming, or had wakened from long sleep. Or perhaps there was little difference between the two. In any event, as I walked briskly through Richmond, Caliban’s rich imagination and inconsolable longing burned within me; and though I was far from unhappy, I cried to dream again.