

He Turned the Key

He turned the key; and having locked the door of his office, he made his way out of the building and went home, thankful that the crisis had been resolved. At least he hoped it had been resolved. 'Yes, surely,' he said to himself, 'it has certainly been resolved.'

They had for the past three years or so been working on the possibility of time travel. Much of the work had been done in secret but some results had been published. They had had been getting more and more successful in *looking* back into past events.

At first it had been to fairly recent events. Success here had been published and used to great effect in catching and prosecuting criminals; so much so, indeed, that crime had fallen dramatically.

Gradually, however, they had pushed back further and further. They could now look up to about two and half to three million years back in time and hoped to extend this further.

They had also in early days tried to look forward in time, but these experiments had proved more problematic. When they had tried to look a week or two ahead they had had some success of sorts. But images had been blurry and it seemed more like shadowy probabilities rather than definite images.

When they had tried to probe further into the future they had run into even greater problems and, indeed, concluded that maybe the future did not exist and was only one of probabilities which would clearly expand exponentially the further one tried to look forward. They had decided for the time being to abandon further experiment on looking forward in time and to concentrate on traveling back in time.

This, as we have said, had proved far more successful. They had found it fascinating looking back in history and they had successfully pushed back into pre-history. Now they were pushing back right to the beginnings of hominins and beyond.

Some of the team, his section in particular, had not remained content with just *looking* at past events. They had wanted to see if it were possible to actually *go* back into the past, that is, to achieve real time travel. It was, they had all recognized, far too risky to attempt such experiments with humans. They had realized that anything like H.G. Wells' time-traveler could not be achieved for very many years.

They had experimented by sending pebbles and other such small objects back into the past. There had been great excitement the first time they saw a pebble they had sent appearing beside the road in 17th century England. Odd stones from the mid 21st century had since re-appeared in locations several thousand years ago.

Following on from this success they had sent mice back in time. At first the creatures had arrived in the past dead; but eventually they had successfully transferred the mice back alive. They had realized they had to be careful and not introduce creatures that were completely alien to the time period, so they had proceeded cautiously.

But if time-travel were ever to be a possibility for humans, it would not be enough to go back in time; the human would want to be able to *return* to his or her own time again. So the team were now experimenting with sending mice back into the past and then bringing them back to the present. The early attempts had

not been successful. After some initial unsuccessful attempts they had managed to get the mice to disappear again from the ancient scene; but the mice did not reappear in the laboratory again and it was unclear what had happened to them. Had they, indeed, ceased to exist at all?

This had led them to question how the pebbles, stones and mice they had sent back into the past actually appeared to people or animals of the time. Did these objects fully exist in the past or were they, so to speak, just 'ghosts'? What sort of existence did they have? Were they just apparitions in the past of things whose time-zone remained the present?

Neither hominins nor animals of the past had shown any overt reaction to the things sent back. But then, the team had sent back only small and fairly insignificant things so perhaps they could be seen but were not reacted to. They had realized they still did not fully understand what was going on when apparently sending something from the present into another time-zone in the past.

If the objects and creatures sent into the past really remained in our time-zone and were merely apparitions in the past, why could we not still see them in the present? They had gone. But now his section were getting objects and mice, which had sent back into the past, apparently disappearing altogether.

Some had suggested they were being brought back to our own time but *in a parallel universe*; others rejected this, saying that the theory of multiple universes or 'multiverse' is a philosophical hypothesis, not a scientific one as it cannot be falsified; they should not waste time considering it. The former group had argued that their experimentation opened the way to test the multiverse hypothesis and that they should do so; the latter had argued that this was distracting them from their task of sending creatures into the past and returning them to the present.

So, unfortunately, a degree of dissension had crept into his section and tensions were rising. Things had come to a head this morning when it was found that some leading members of his section had been trying to bring back the lost mice by locating which parallel universe they had been returned to. A fierce argument had broken out about time and money being wasted; the argument had become very heated and he had wondered how he was going to calm things when it was noticed that something was appearing in the time capsule in the laboratory.

Argument ceased and all looked in wonder or horror at what was materializing. It was not one of the lost mice or anything else they had sent back into the past.

"It's *litchen*," one had cried.

"You mean *liken*," another had said.

While a third member of the section had said: "Stop quibbling, you two. It's some kind of alien fungus, if you ask me."

"Stop!!" he had shouted. "We don't know what it is. Send it back immediately."

One or two had thought of asking how they could send it back as they didn't know where it had come from; but they had thought better of that and had just thrown the machine into reverse.

The alien substance had disappeared from the capsule and they had seen it apparently materializing in a landscape they had never seen before and which the machine registered as being more than five millions years back in time. But they had paid no further attention to that and had set about decontaminating and

sterilizing the time capsule. It had been important to do that.

What neither he nor any of his section had realized was that they had already breathed in microscopic spores from the alien substance, and that these spores found warm, moist human lungs just the right environment in which to germinate. Already they were gradually spreading mycelium-like filaments across the lungs and contaminating blood with their toxins.

On his journey home he started to feel odd and he began to find himself getting short of breath. 'I must get home quickly,' he thought to himself.

As he approached his front door, he took out his bunch of keys and, selecting the right one, put it into the lock. As he breathed his last breath, he turned the key.

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