

I heard a sound like a laugh – but perhaps I was mistaken. Then I got a big stone from the river and hit the metal until I had flattened part of the decoration. The little people could hear the noise a kilometre way in all directions, but they did nothing.

‘I saw a crowd of them on the hillside, looking at me in a frightened way. At last, hot and tired, I sat down to watch the place. But I was too impatient to watch for long. I could work at a problem for years, but I was unable to wait, inactive, for twenty-four hours.

‘I got up after a time and began walking aimlessly through the bushes towards the hill again. “Patience,” I said to myself. “If you want your machine again, you must leave that pedestal alone. If they intend to take your machine away, it won’t help if you destroy their metal panels. If they don’t, you will get it back when you can ask for it.

“Face this world. Learn its ways, watch it, be careful of guessing its meaning too quickly. In the end you will find an answer to it all.” Then suddenly the humour of the situation came into my mind: the thought of the years I had spent in study and work to get into the future age, and now my impatience to get out of it. I had put myself into the most hopeless situation a man could ever imagine. I couldn’t help laughing at myself.

Chapter 7 Ghosts

‘Going through the big palace, it seemed to me that the little people were staying away from me. Perhaps it was my imagination, or because I had hit the metal panels. I was careful, though, to show no worry and not try to catch any of them, and after a day or two the situation got back to normal.

‘I decided to put any thought of my Time Machine and the

mystery of the metal doors as much as possible in a corner of my memory. I hoped that in the end, growing knowledge would lead me back to them in a natural way. But you can understand why I stayed within a circle of a few kilometres around my point of arrival.

‘As far as I could see, all the world seemed to be like the Thames valley. From every hill I saw the same large numbers of fine buildings, all very different in material and style, and the same kinds of trees and bushes. I soon noticed, though, a number of wells in the ground. Several of these, it seemed to me, were very deep. One lay by a path up the hill, which I had followed during my first walk. Like the others, it had a top made of metal, interestingly decorated and protected by a little roof from the rain.

‘Sitting by the side of these wells, and looking down into the darkness, I could see no sign of water or any reflection when I lit a match. But in all of them I heard a certain sound like the beating of a big engine. I also discovered, from the flames of my matches, that air was going down into them. I threw a piece of paper down into one and, instead of falling slowly, it was at once pulled quickly out of sight. I couldn’t imagine what these wells were for.

‘And I must say now that I learned very little about many parts of the life of these people. Let me describe my difficulties. I went into several big palaces, but they were just living places, great dining-halls and sleeping apartments. I could find no machines of any kind, but these people were dressed in fine cloth that didn’t seem very old, and their shoes, though undecorated, were very well made.

‘But the people didn’t seem to make things themselves. There were no shops, no factories, no signs that they brought things in from other places. They spent all their time playing gently, swimming in the river, falling in love in a half-playful way, eating