

Chapter 2 The Traveller Returns

I think at that time none of us really believed in the Time Machine. The fact is, the Time Traveller was one of those men who are too clever to be believed. You never felt that you knew everything about him. You always thought that something was hidden, that he was playing a trick on you. If Filby showed us the model and explained things in the Time Traveller's words, we would believe him more easily. We would understand his reasons – because anyone could understand Filby. But the Time Traveller had a strong imagination and we didn't really believe him.

The next Thursday I went to Richmond again and, arriving late, found four or five men already in the sitting room. The Medical Man was standing in front of the fire with a sheet of paper in one hand and his watch in the other. I looked around for the Time Traveller.

'It's half-past seven now,' said the Medical Man. 'I suppose we'd better have dinner?'

'Where's our host?' I asked.

'You have just come? It's rather odd. He has been delayed. He asks me in this note to start dinner at seven if he's not back. He says he will explain when he comes.'

'It seems a pity to let the dinner spoil,' said the editor of a well-known daily paper, and so the Medical Man rang the bell.

Only the Psychologist, the Medical Man and myself had attended the first dinner. The other men were the Editor, a journalist and another – a quiet, shy man with a beard – who I didn't know. There was some discussion at the dinner table about the Time Traveller's absence and I suggested time travelling, in a half-joking way. The Editor wanted that to be explained to him and the Psychologist gave a very dull description of the 'clever trick' we had seen a week before.

He was in the middle of this when the door opened slowly and without noise. I was facing it and saw him first. 'Well!' I said. 'At last!'

The door opened wider and the Time Traveller stood in front of us. I gave a cry of surprise.

'Oh, my friend! What's the matter?' cried the Medical Man, who saw him next.

The others turned towards the door.

He looked very strange. His coat was dusty and dirty, his hair untidy and, it seemed to me, greyer – either with dust or because its colour had gone. His face was very pale and his chin had a cut on it. For a moment he stopped at the door; the light seemed too strong for his eyes. Then he came into the room. He walked slowly, with a bad limp.

He did not say a word, but came painfully to the table and moved a hand towards the wine. The Editor filled a glass and pushed it towards him. He drank it and it seemed to do him good because he looked round the table and smiled a little.

'What have you been doing?' said the Medical Man.

The Time Traveller did not seem to hear. 'Don't let me worry you,' he said in a tired voice. 'I'm all right.' He stopped, held out his glass for more, and drank it down. 'That's good,' he said. His eyes grew brighter, and a faint colour came to his face. Then he spoke again. 'I'm going to wash and dress, and then I'll come down and explain things . . . Save me some of that meat. I'm hungry.' The Editor began a question. 'I'll tell you soon,' said the Time Traveller. 'I'm feeling strange! I'll be all right in a minute.'

He put down his glass and walked towards the door to the stairs. Standing up in my place, I saw his feet as he went out. He had nothing on them except a pair of socks with holes in them. They were covered with dried blood. Then the door closed behind him. For a minute, perhaps, my mind was empty.