

## The Third Level — Detailed Summary

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#### Introduction to the Story

The story is narrated by Charley, a 31-year-old ordinary man living in New York. He insists that there is a third level in the famous Grand Central Station, even though official records and the presidents of the railroads swear that there are only two. Charley believes he has been to this mysterious third level himself.

When he tells people about it, including his psychiatrist friend, they dismiss it as his imagination — a “waking dream wish fulfillment.” In simple terms, they think it’s his mind’s way of escaping from the stress of the modern world. Charley’s wife, Louisa, is annoyed when the psychiatrist says this, but the explanation is that the modern age is filled with fear, war, worry, and insecurity, so people naturally want to escape.

Charley agrees that life in the present is full of problems, but he insists that what he saw was real.

#### Charley’s Ordinary Life

Charley describes himself as an average man:

- Age: 31
- Clothing: Tan gabardine suit, straw hat with a fancy band
- Occupation: Office worker
- Hobby: Collecting stamps (a hobby started by his grandfather)

His life isn’t especially troubled, and he was not trying to escape anything the day it happened. He simply wanted to get home to his wife after work.

#### The Day Charley Found the Third Level

One evening, after working late, Charley decided to take the subway from Grand Central Station to get home faster.

- He entered the station through Vanderbilt Avenue.
- First, he went down to the first level (long-distance trains).
- Then, down to the second level (suburban trains).
- From there, he went toward the subway.

But he got lost — which he says is easy to do in Grand Central, since it is full of corridors, stairways, and tunnels. Sometimes these passages lead to strange places — he once ended up at the Roosevelt Hotel and another time on Forty-sixth Street.

Charley even jokes that Grand Central is like a growing tree, constantly sending out new “roots” in the form of tunnels. He speculates that maybe some tunnels lead to unusual or unknown places.

### The Strange Corridor

While wandering, Charley entered a corridor that slanted downward and to the left.

- The sound of his footsteps echoed; there was no one else around.
- Eventually, he heard the faint sounds of people talking.
- The tunnel turned sharply, and he came to a short staircase.
- Going down, he stepped into what looked like another level of the station — the Third Level.

### The Third Level’s Appearance

At first, he thought it might just be another part of the second level. But he soon noticed it was different:

- The room was smaller.
- The ticket windows and gates were fewer.
- The information booth was wooden and old-fashioned, and the man there wore a green eyeshade and black sleeve protectors.
- The lights were open-flame gaslights, flickering dimly.
- Brass spittoons (for chewing tobacco) were on the floor.
- People’s clothing was from the 1890s — derby hats, long coats, beards, and sideburns.
- Women wore long dresses with leg-of-mutton sleeves and high-buttoned shoes.
- Outside, on the tracks, he saw a small steam locomotive with a funnel-shaped smokestack — a style from the late 19th century.

### Realizing It’s 1894

Charley confirmed his suspicion by looking at a newspaper a boy was selling.

- The paper was *The World*, which hasn’t been published for many years.
- The date was June 11, 1894, and the lead story mentioned President Cleveland.

It dawned on Charley: somehow, he had traveled — or slipped — back in time to 1894 through this third level.

### Why Galesburg, Illinois?

Seeing an opportunity, Charley thought about buying tickets to Galesburg, Illinois, his hometown.

- Galesburg in 1894, he says, was peaceful, with big houses, huge trees, and quiet summer evenings.
- Families would sit on lawns, men smoked cigars, women waved fans, and fireflies glowed in the dusk.
- This was decades before the World Wars — a simpler, calmer world.

Charley approached the ticket window and asked for two tickets to Galesburg for himself and Louisa.

#### The Problem with Money

The clerk calculated the fare. Charley had enough — but when he handed over his bills, the clerk became suspicious.

- Charley's money was modern currency, smaller and differently designed than the 1890s bills.
- The clerk accused him of trying to cheat and warned him about jail.

Frightened, Charley left quickly and made his way back.

#### Preparing to Return

The next day, determined to try again, Charley withdrew \$300 from his bank account (nearly all his savings) and exchanged it for old-style currency at a coin dealer's shop.

- The old bills were larger and cost him a premium, so his \$300 became less than \$200 in 1890s money.
- He didn't care, since in 1894 prices were extremely low (eggs were 13 cents a dozen).

But no matter how hard he tried, Charley never again found the passage to the third level.

#### Louisa's Reaction

When Charley told Louisa, she worried about his obsession and asked him to stop searching. For a while, he did — going back to his stamp collection instead.

#### Proof the Third Level Exists

Things changed when Charley got unexpected proof that the third level was real.

His friend Sam Weiner, a psychiatrist, had mysteriously disappeared. Charley suspected that Sam, after hearing about Galesburg, might have gone looking for the third level himself.

One night, while going through his old stamp collection, Charley found something strange:

- A first-day cover (an envelope with a stamp postmarked on its first day of issue, usually blank inside) that didn't belong in his collection.
- It was addressed to Charley's grandfather in Galesburg.
- The postmark was July 18, 1894.
- The stamp had a portrait of President Garfield.
- But instead of being blank, it contained a letter.

#### The Letter from Sam

The letter inside was from Sam, written from Galesburg, 1894:

- Sam said he first doubted Charley but then found the third level himself.
- He had been living in Galesburg for two weeks, enjoying the peaceful life.

- People sang on porches, played the piano, and drank lemonade in the evenings.
- He invited Charley and Louisa to keep looking for the third level because it was “worth it.”

Later, Charley learned that Sam had bought \$800 in old currency before disappearing — enough to start a hay, feed, and grain business in 1894. Sam certainly couldn’t go back to his old job — because, ironically, his old job was being Charley’s psychiatrist.

### Themes and Meanings

#### 1. Escape from Modern Life

- The story reflects how people feel trapped by the worries and rush of the modern world.
- Charley, Sam, and perhaps others long for a simpler, more peaceful past.

#### 2. Time Travel and Fantasy

- The third level is never clearly explained — is it magic, imagination, or a time portal?
- This uncertainty blurs the line between reality and fantasy.

#### 3. Nostalgia

- Galesburg in 1894 represents an idealized past, safe from wars and modern anxieties.
- The longing for “the good old days” drives the characters’ desire to find the third level.

#### 4. The Power of Belief

- Charley is sure the third level exists despite disbelief from others.
- Sam’s letter serves as “proof,” showing that sometimes imagination and reality can intersect.

### Conclusion of the Story

Charley still searches for the third level with Louisa.

Whether it’s real or imagined, the third level represents hope — the possibility of finding peace in a chaotic world. Jack Finney leaves it to readers to decide if Charley truly traveled in time or simply dreamed it up. But either way, the story captures the universal desire to escape to a better, calmer place.