

## The Third Level

Jack Finney

### GIST OF THE STORY

Charley, an ordinary man – ordinary guy, thirty-one years of age

He exists in the twentieth century; but yearns for a world of the 1890s. He quests for a past world believing that it would cocoon him from the trials and tribulations of the modern world.

The story criss-crosses between time and space giving Charley the refuge he so had longed for.

The modern world, the 20 <sup>th</sup> C	<p>One night last summer he had worked late at the office and was in a hurry to get to his apartment; so he decided to take the subway from Grand Central because it's faster than the bus. He just wanted to get home to Louisa, his wife.</p> <p>This was what happened at the station:</p> <p>He turned into Grand Central from Vanderbilt Avenue, and went down the steps to the first level, where trains like the Twentieth Century leave from.</p> <p>Then he walked down another flight to the second level, where the suburban trains leave from.</p> <p>And then he ducked into an arched doorway heading for the subway and got lost.</p>
	<p><b>His thoughts:</b> Grand Central was growing like a tree, pushing out new corridors and staircases like roots. And might be, because for so many people through the years Grand Central has been an exit, a way of escape, that's how he had got into the tunnel.</p>
The 1894 world	<p>Following the tunnel, he went down a short flight of stairs and came out on the third level at Grand Central Station. He saw –</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. the room was smaller</li><li>2. there were fewer ticket windows and train gates</li><li>3. the information booth in the centre was wood and old-looking.</li><li>4. the man in the booth wore a green eyeshade and long black sleeve protectors</li><li>5. The lights were dim and sort of flickering – they were open-flame gas lights.</li><li>6. There were brass spittoons on the floor</li><li>7. He beheld a man pulling a gold watch from his vest pocket. He snapped open the cover, glanced at his watch and frowned. He wore a derby hat, a black four-button suit with tiny lapels, and he had a big, black, handlebar moustache.</li></ol>

	<p>8. Then he looked around and saw that everyone in the station was dressed like eighteen-ninety-something. He had never seen so many beards, sideburns and fancy moustaches in all his life.</p> <p>9. Out on the tracks, Charley caught a glimpse of a locomotive, a very small Currier &amp; Ives locomotive with a funnel-shaped stack.</p> <p>10. To make himself sure, he walked over to a newsboy and glanced at the stack of papers at his feet. It was <i>The World</i> and the newspaper hadn't been published for years. The lead story said something about President Cleveland and it was printed June 11, 1894.</p> <p>He turned toward the ticket windows knowing that he could buy tickets that would take Louisa and him anywhere in the United States. He wanted two tickets to Galesburg, Illinois. It was to be back there with the First World War still twenty years off and World War II over forty years in the future.</p> <p>When he paid the cash at the counter, the clerk suspected him for tendering fake currency. Threatened, Charley ran out of the third level and reached home.</p>
	<p><b>Galesburg, Illinois</b> – It was a wonderful town, with big old frame houses, huge lawns, and tremendous trees whose branches meet overhead and roof the streets. And in 1894, summer evenings were twice as long, and people sat out on their lawns, the men smoking cigars and talking quietly, the women waving palm-leaf fans, with the fire-flies all around, in a peaceful world.</p>
The modern world, the 20 <sup>th</sup> C	<p>Next day, during lunch hour, he drew three hundred dollars out of the bank and bought old-style currency. His three hundred dollars bought less than two hundred in old-style bills. However he had never again found the corridor that leads to the third level at Grand Central Station, although he had tried often enough.</p> <p>All these worried Louisa and she didn't want him to look for the third level any more.</p>
The modern world, the 20 <sup>th</sup> C	<p><b>THE THIRD LEVEL NEVER EXISTED:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. THE presidents of the New York Central and the New York, New Haven and Hartford railroads would swear that there were only two levels.</li> <li>2. He had talked to a psychiatrist friend of his, among others and had told him about the third level at Grand Central Station, and he said it was a waking-dream-wish-fulfilment, a 'temporary refuge from reality.' He said that he was unhappy, clarifying that the modern world was full of insecurity, fear, war and worry and that he just wanted to escape.</li> </ol>
	And Charley went back to my stamps
Quest for the	But sometime later, Louisa and he were <i>both</i> looking, every weekend, because they were convinced that the third level was still there.

THIRD LEVEL	<p>1. His friend Sam Weiner had disappeared. Charley had told him about Galesburg and he always said he liked the sound of the place. Therefore, he was there right in 1894.</p> <p>2. Among his oldest first-day covers, he found one that was mailed to his grandfather at his home in Galesburg. The address on the envelope stated so. It had been there since July 18, 1894. The stamp was a six-cent, dull brown, with a picture of President Garfield. When the envelope came to his grandfather in the mail, it went right into his collection and stayed there till he took it out and opened it.</p> <p>The paper inside wasn't blank.</p> <p><i>Sam had found the third level. He had been in Galesburg, Illinois for two weeks and urged Charley and Louisa to keep looking till they had found the third level.</i></p>
	<p><b>REASONS:</b></p> <p>1. The desire to reach the third level was so strong that he made himself believe that his wife and psychiatrist friend too believed him. The letter could have been Charley invention.</p> <p>2. Alternately Sam too could have been influenced - Sam had bought eight hundred dollars' worth of old-style currency which would help him set up a nice little hay, feed and grain business.</p>

### **QUESTIONS & ANSWERS**

What does the third level refer to?

The third level refers to the subway of the Grand Central Station that takes one to Galesburg, Illinois. The third level at the station was a medium of escape for Charley from the insecurity, fear, war and worry of modern life. It provided him a platform where he could interweave fantasy and reality.

How did Charley reach the third level of the Grand Central Station?

Grand Central Station, New York, has only two levels. One evening Charley reached this station and then walked down the second level to catch an early train to his home. While he was on the second level, he strangely happened to notice a doorway down. He followed the steps and reached the third level which was never heard or seen before by anyone. In the third level Charley saw a hundred-year old world and people.

Why is Grand Central compared to a tree?

Ans. Grand Central was compared to a tree because it was pushing out new corridors and staircases like roots. There may be a tunnel under the city up to Times Square and another to Central Park. Nobody knows about them. For many people it has been an exit, a way of escape through the years.

How did 'The World' help Charley to confirm his doubts regarding the existence of a third level?

The World was a popular newspaper which hadn't been published for years.. Having reached the third level of the Grand Central Station, Charley noticed that The World was still available. He saw that day's edition of the newspaper and the date, June 11, 1894 and confirmed that he was back in 1894. The lead story said something about President Cleveland.

How did Charley ascertain that he had reached the 1894 world?

Charley reached the third level of the Grand Central Railway Station, New York. Amidst his fresh amazement, Charley could not relate the possibility of being in a hundred year old world. But when Charley observed the dim gas lamps, brass spittoons, old styled costumes of men and women, moustaches and beards generally worn by men then, string-watches and so on, Charley began to doubt that he had become part of the old world. He got it resolved only at the sight of The World, the newspaper that bore the date, June 11 1894, with a piece of news of President Cleveland.

Why did Charley run away from the third level?

Charley was greatly amazed when he reached the hundred year old third level and was planning to buy two rail tickets to Galesburg where he had spent his childhood. But when he took out his money to pay the fare, the clerk found out that his notes were fake and thought that Charley was attempting to fool him. He warned him that he would call the police. Seeing that there was nothing good about police and jail in the hundred year old Galesburg, Charley ran away.

What is First Day Cover?

When a new stamp is issued, stamp collectors buy some and use them to mail envelopes to themselves on the very first day of sale; and the postmark proves the date. The envelope is called a first-day cover. They're never opened; just a blank paper is put in the envelope.

How did Charley's friends relate his stamp collecting habit to his being abnormal?

Charley had a collection of stamps. When he told his friends of the third level at the Grand Central Station, all his friends believed that he was psychically unwell. They said that his stamp collecting was a 'temporary refuge from reality.'

### **LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS**

1. Do you think that the third level was a medium of escape for Charley? Elaborate.

Value Points: Harsh reality of modern world - insecurity, fear, war and worry - he just wanted to escape -Wished to visit Galesburg of 1890s - old frame houses, huge lawns, beautiful trees - People sitting on lawns relaxed, calm and peaceful

Exchanging new currency for old currency, Roping in his wife and Sam into his third world, saying that Sam also bought old currency, the letter from Sam in his first day cover are all his figment of imagination.

It was a medium of escape - could not face the challenges of modern world.

2. What do you infer from Sam's letter to Charley?

The way Charley came across Sam's letter was surrounded in mystery. Among his oldest first-day covers, he found an envelope. The envelope containing the letter bore the address of his grandfather's home in Galesburg. It had been there since July 18, 1894. The postmark showed the picture of President Garfield. Generally the first day covers have blank papers in them, but this one contained a letter. The letter was addressed to Charley. *Sam had found the third level. He had been in Galesburg, Illinois for two weeks and urged Charley and Louisa to keep looking till they had found the third level.* Clearly, the letter was a product of Charley's imagination.

4. Do you see an intersection of time and space in the story?

There are certain instances in the story that show an intersection of time and space. Firstly, the first two levels of Grand Central Station were located in the present time while the third level existed in the 1890s. Secondly, Charley and his wife, Louisa, live in the present time yet Charley rushes to get old currency to buy two tickets to go to the Galesburg of 1894. Further, the old architecture of the platform at the third level is different from the modern platforms of the first two levels. Besides, the archaic manner of dressing by the people, and the newspaper, *The World*, dated June 11, 1984 also overlap with Charley's real time world and existence. Lastly, the letter that was mailed to Charley's grandfather on 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1894 highlights the intersection of time and space as the sender (Charley's friend Sam) and receiver (Charley himself) belong to the present time.