



# TIME AND TIME AGAIN

**Phil Parker**

Time and time again I'd told myself not to get involved. A scientist needed to remain objective, interaction with your subject on a personal level compromised everything. Once I returned to HQ, they'd ridicule my findings if they found out, perhaps even return me to reporting on mundane missions. And I'd had my fill of commenting on coronations. There were only so many times you could watch a crown being plonked on someone's head to resounding cheers from the populace.

I just couldn't help myself. The poor guy was in turmoil and, being new to the area, had no other friends in which to confide. I'd rented the adjoining house so I could observe him but neighbours can make good listeners too. My first mistake took the form of telling him I was a scientist. I reasoned a burgeoning friendship was unlikely to ignite if I was a brush salesman, a common enough occupation in 1895. I knew not to disclose too much. I invented an occupation in a closely guarded government project, where saying too much landed you in the Tower of London. Despite my efforts our friendship grew, mainly because I was a sympathetic ear where his divorce was concerned.

It was a time when such affairs held a stigma which penetrated all levels of society and caused people to judge without knowing the details. Being the guilty party made things worse. He'd moved to Woking to escape the gossip but its claws still gripped him tightly. The man who'd "run off" with one of his students. A womaniser obviously. Disreputable. A cad. A bounder.

Perhaps I should have been just as judgemental. Perhaps I could have maintained that all-important objectivity by keeping him at arm's length. But the nature of my work filled thousands of iterations of that word. Perhaps. The most dangerous word in the universe.

And so my second mistake occurred.

'Good afternoon, my friend! I wonder if I might prevail upon your kind nature?'

'Herb! Come in!' I shuffled my daily report into a desk drawer with practised sleight-of-hand. 'You're always welcome.'

He waited until I poured the tea into the dainty porcelain cups that determined my level of sophistication in society. I'd spent a little time with a samurai's family in the early

nineteenth century and was accustomed to tea ceremonies. England may have been different to Japan in many ways, showing respect for an infusion of shredded leaves was one thing they shared. He sipped from his cup and placed it back on the saucer and sighed heavily.



‘My dear Amy has encountered yet more hostility in the local grocery shop on Woking High Street. A middle-aged woman actually had the audacity to call her a harlot. Can you imagine it? Unforgiveable.’ His impressive moustache vibrated with anger.

‘Give it a little time, Herb. They’ll find more gossip to occupy their little minds and you and Amy will be quite forgotten.’

‘I know. But I do so hate to see her tormented so. She shouldn’t spend her time crying and regretting what we’ve done.’

‘I know. But Time is a great healer.’

I was well aware of the irony of that cliché. If the poor guy hadn’t looked so downcast, I might have allowed myself a smile, but he did, so I didn’t. We stared impotently into our teacups, two men unable to fathom the best way to navigate the moral maze of Victorian society. Me because I was a stranger to it. He, because he despised it.

It led to another one of his monologues.

‘I tell you, old chap, I have less and less faith in our race. Our esteemed Prime Minister, the Marquess of Salisbury, writes in the newspapers about how we stand on the doorstep of an exciting new world, where invention will be our watchword. I do not share his optimism. The future is not going to be the rosy-spectacled world he describes. Our class, dear fellow, will deteriorate into shallow helplessness. I fear it will be the working class who will, one day, turn this world on its head. We will succumb to their savagery, you mark my words.’

I escaped his tirade by offering to top up the teapot with more hot water. His dour proclamations continued. The problem I faced was knowing he was right. The guy was prophetic in his assessments. Historians would remark on his perceptive views.

I sauntered back into the sitting room, armed with the teapot as he fiddled with his pipe. I was grateful for the distraction.

‘The blighter’s gone out again. Do you have any matches, dear boy?’

‘In my desk drawer.’

It was an outdated method to me, lighting fires to obtain any heat in my home. Matchsticks were a bizarre solution to a simple problem. I placed the tea pot on to the small table by our armchairs and looked up just as my friend reached into the wrong desk drawer. I’d meant the ornate desk by the fireplace. Instead he pulled open the drawer to my writing desk.

He was too far away to race over and slam it shut. Besides, such behaviour would have aroused his curiosity. I could only watch as time stood still. Something I knew well.

He delicately picked up the Instigator Key between finger and thumb, frowning at its plump slug-like appearance.

‘What’s this, old chap?’



I hurried over, held out my hand for him to hand over the jellified substance. Linked to my DNA, it carried me through time by encapsulating my body, his touch ran the risk of compromising its integrity. I understood his bewilderment. He handed it over willingly enough but that was only because he’d spied my report. His keen eyes had spotted his name. He lifted it out of the drawer, fascinated by its silver binding and malleable plastic texture.

I was at a loss to know what to say or do. This was a new experience. There were stories back at HQ of similar experiences with compromised chrononauts. Some had invented elaborate stories which inevitably got them in trouble, accusations of witchcraft were nothing new to us. My brain struggled to find any explanation that might satisfy such an intelligent man. He gazed into my face, his etched with curiosity. I still couldn’t find an explanation. All my brain wanted to do was remind me that I would be reporting on coronations for the rest of my life. Unless they sent me to prison for Temporal Intervention.

All the trainers at Chononautic Corps would use this moment as a cautionary tale for their students.

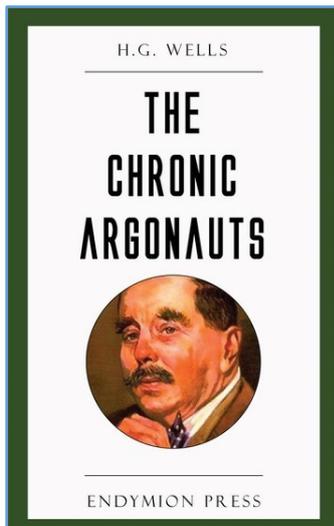
‘I knew something was different about you, old chap. Couldn’t put my finger on it. An educated fellow who displayed such a limited grasp of social conventions, made me wonder if you’d been abroad for a long time. Somewhere uncivilised. Like America.’

He smiled at me. Admittedly not the reaction I’d anticipated.

‘But your disadvantage wasn’t caused by geography. But by time.’

I hoped prison would be comfortable. Then a worse fate occurred to me. They’d send me back to the Jurassic age. That way I couldn’t cause any more damage. And if I didn’t make it back because a tyrannosaurus had eaten me, even better. I felt sick.

‘Aren’t you shocked?’ I squeaked. The man chewed on his pipe like he did when we discussed anything that needed his full attention. He shook his head, smiled disarmingly.



‘I’m a writer, my friend, it is our privilege to consider worlds beyond what we know and experience every day. Seven years ago, when I studied at the Normal School for Science, I wrote a short story for their magazine. I called it the Chronic Argonauts. It followed the adventures of a scientist who invented a time machine.’

He thrust his pipe at me gleefully.

‘There! Now what do you say about that eh?’

I smiled back, relieved now a way out of my predicament presented itself. He thrust his pipe at me again, forehead furrowing now.

‘But why are you here? Why are you so interested in a failed draper’s apprentice and chemist’s assistant?’

‘You are destined for a significant contribution to your time, Herb. I can’t tell you any more for fear this intervention may disrupt future events. I’m sure you understand?’

He nodded thoughtfully then jerked his pipe at the slimy lump of temporal slippage now squirming in the palm of my hand, it was eager to fulfil its purpose again. He wanted to

know how such an incongruous substance could propel a person into the past. Despite his scientific background, he would never understand how it repelled time, in the way a duck's feathers react to water. But as a writer, that wasn't necessary, the mere mention could cause another scientist to investigate the theory. More temporal disruption.

After he gave up his casual interrogation, realising I wouldn't give anything else away, we shook hands and he departed. I could return to the Corp's HQ to report that The Time Machine had its origins in an earlier short story in an obscure magazine, assuring my superiors that no temporal intercession had occurred after all.

Later, after eliminating every trace of my existence in this timeframe, I stood outside Herb's home on the Maybury Road and watched him sit down at his writing desk by his window. He was about to begin work on his first full-length piece of speculative writing. Initiating a career with The Time Machine that would define an entire literary genre, turn him into the Father of Science Fiction. I stared over at Horsell Common, where he'd site his next story about a Martian invasion and have it published in Pearson's magazine.



I smiled, a little smugly I admit, having avoided the penalties of my mistakes. I could return to my time to report HG Wells did create time travel from his imagination, without any outside interference.

But only just.