

# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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# CLOSED CIRCUIT

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

*They were determined to stop Ollin from completing his time machine, while he was equally determined to reach the future. Sometimes, however, things are confused—and the hardest things are the easiest part.*

"If you will follow me," the museum guide said, motioning toward the next room, "The exhibit will begin almost immediately."

Veerdus and Gan followed the crowd of sightseers. In the middle of the exhibit room was a small raised platform, which the crowd gathered around. Veerdus didn't have to look up the exhibit in his guide book.

"It's the man from the past," Veerdus said. "You know. The famous one."

"Oh, good," Gan said, smoothing her hair. She wasn't too interested in museums. Shows and dancing were more her idea of a honeymoon, with perhaps a Mars hop to climax it. But it was Veerdus' honeymoon too, and he had always wanted to see the Time Museum.

"I'm so glad we came," Gan said.

"I am too," Veerdus said, smiling at his bride of six hours. "After this we'll go dancing. We'll do anything you like!"

"Shh," Gan said. The guide was speaking.

"Bernard Ollin, the man from the past, is one of the finest exhibits in the Time Museum. Actually, the museum was constructed around him." The guide glanced at his watch, then back to the crowd. "Can everyone see? There's more room over there, sir . . . Fine. The man from the past will appear in exactly three minutes, upon that platform."

"I've read all this," Veerdus said.

"Shh," Gan said again. "I haven't."



"When he appears," the guide was saying, "Note especially the details of 20th century dress. Technically, his ensemble is called a 'suit', although—"

But Gan wasn't listening now. She gave Veerdus a sidelong glance.

"Love me?" she whispered.

"You bet," Veerdus answered softly.

The vacuum tube had been lying motionless on the table for half an hour. Now, for no apparent reason, it started rolling toward the edge. Bernard Ollin caught it before it fell, held it a moment uncertainly, then put it in a drawer.

Let *them* try to break it now!

He returned to the control panel of his time machine. The machine was divided into two sections. One, designed to send Ollin into the future, would remain in his cellar. The other, smaller unit, would accompany him into the future. This unit would enable him to return to the past.

The two units were compact, like Ollin himself. And like Ollin, they had a look of savage, monomaniacal efficiency.

Ollin finished setting the last dial with abrupt, precise movements. He scowled happily at the result; then a flutter of motion caught the corner of his eye.

He glanced at a bundle of wires at the base of the control panel. An uninsulated lead had torn loose from its contact, and was bending toward another wire two feet away.

Ollin wanted to swear, but an habitual taciturnity made him clench his jaws together. He nipped the wire back with a pair of insulated pliers, and wound it securely in place.

*They* were clever, he thought. If the wires had touched, several months work would have burned out.

The wire hadn't just come loose. He had soldered it into place himself. Just as the vacuum tube hadn't just "happened" to roll.

*They* were still trying to stop him.

And very hard they had tried in the last hour. Circuits had mysteriously been altered, settings changed. Trace elements had gotten into his sealed solutions. Anything, to keep him out of the future.

Why, he asked himself. But there was no answer.

Ollin took the vacuum tube out of the drawer, almost dropping it as it slid—or was pushed through his fingers. He maintained his grip, clamping his jaws together until his teeth ached, and plugged the tube into place.

He glanced again at his settings and unceremoniously threw the main switch.

There was a sensation of vertigo, movement—and then it stopped. He was still in the cellar.

Again he tried. This time, he could feel a definite opposing force, as though a giant hand were pushing him back.

He switched off the main current and checked his machines. Everything was in order.

The third time he failed again. Bernard Ollin unclamped his mouth long enough to spit on the floor. *They* were responsible, of course. Unseen presences had been persecuting him since childhood. These people—whom he referred to only as *they*—were always interfering with his experiments, hindering him. Now they had used some force, to oppose the force of his machine.

Ollin had decided, long ago, that a concerted effort was being made to keep him out of the future. It had started when he was ten, playing with his chemistry set, and had continued through high school and college. Never was it more obvious than now.

This certainty had reinforced Ollin's determination to make his machine work.

*They!*

Suddenly, Ollin closed the switch again. Instantly he felt the vertigo of movement. There was no opposing force this time. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists.

A gasp went up from the crowd, and the guide smiled. Ollin's sudden appearance, his strained body materializing from nothing, never failed to thrill the sightseers. Dutifully the guide went on with his prepared talk.

"Bernard Ollin, the man from the past, is now before you. He can not see or hear you. Note especially the dazed expression on his face, the trace of hopelessness. All Ollin sees is a grayness, featureless and without end. This is because—" The guide went into a glib explanation of time-travel theory.

"The haircut of this man," the guide went on, leading his listeners into more familiar paths, "is fairly typical of his age. Long in front, clipped short in back. Long front hair, in the 20th century, was popularly supposed to denote an artistic or scientific type, although—"

The guide talked about the customs of Ollin's age, while the crowd stared at the bewildered man.

"He looks so unhappy," Gan

said, holding Veerdus' hand. "Look at his face!"

The crowd held their collective breath, looking at the tense, over-stimulated, brutish face of 20th century man.

"He's looking around now," Veerdus said. "The guidebook says he has a persecution-fear."

The guide was talking about that, so they listened.

"This man's persecution-fear," the guide said, "is not entirely unfounded, as you all must know. At this point he doesn't suspect the true nature of that persecution. He believes that persons from the future are, and have been, trying to hinder him."

"Oh, look," Gan said. "He's trying to return to his own time now. He's pushing the button. Oh!"

She clutched Veerdus' hand tightly. The man from the past had pushed the return button. When nothing happened, the expression on his face was terrible.

When nothing happened, Ollin felt as though a bottomless pit had opened in his stomach. Was he caught here, in this meaningless limbo? What had happened?

He set the dial again, and pushed the button.

This time he distinctly felt a counter-force moving against him.

So *they* were still around. Ollin decided that he must have done a forbidden thing. Perhaps there were laws against time-travel, enforced by some unimaginable creatures. They had tried to keep him in his own time. Failing, they were going to keep him in the future.

Ollin's iron control started to crumble as he stared into the mist. The more he considered it, the more he was certain that that was the right answer. He wasn't going to be allowed to bring his knowledge back to his own world.

Ollin emitted a sound, between a cry and a snarl, and shoved the button again.

Still he was in the gray nothingness. He bit his lip hard, and sat down to think.

"I know you will all be interested in Ollin's thought-processes," the guide said. "So if you will look at the screen overhead, we are flashing his associations."

Everyone looked up. On a screen a series of words were moving colored for emotional content. Beside the main stream of thoughts other associations started, and faded away. Emotions, represented only as colors, flashed across the edges of the screen.

"Lost — lost — persecution —

damn them—way out—nature of time—”

“Note,” the guide continued, “The random character of his associations at this point. And yet, already apparent are the threads of truth.”

“Did people really think that way?” Gan asked, amazed at the connotations of some of the words.

“All of the time,” Veerdus told her.

“But the sexual content—”

“He couldn’t help himself,” Veerdus said.

Gan shook her head. She, like everyone else, had conscious control of every thought she was capable of. When she wanted to think about sex, she thought about it. But only then.

It was hard to imagine a person thinking of sex even when they really *didn’t* want to.

“His associations are changing now,” the guide said. “Note the key words — interplay — change—stasis—and how he interweaves them.”

“This is really interesting,” Gan said. She had never imagined that something as dry and academic as time-travel could have dramatic possibilities.

“Look,” Veerdus said, pointing at the screen. “Those underlying patterns, the fading ones. **They must be rejected solutions.**”

“Ollin has reached a course of

action,” the guide said. “He has examined his immediate possibilities. He knows that he cannot go into an alternate future, because the controls for future movements are in his cellar.”

The man from the past seemed to be staring right at them, Gan thought.

“He cannot take up his life in another past, for reasons explained in his theory of time—which, by the way, is still accepted as generally valid.”

“Why can’t he?” someone near the guide asked.

“To put it as simply as possible,” the guide replied, “Ollin is in a circuit between his present and this point. His influence extends along his entire past life-line, of course. But because of the circuit, he cannot—*live*—in any time except his own.”

“Then why can’t he—” the man began, but the guide interrupted him.

“I’ll gladly answer your question later, sir. Now I’d like to explain what he is going to do.” The guide smiled, and went back to his prepared talk. “Ollin has, accordingly, decided to try to exert an influence on his own development. He reasons that by altering certain emergent points in his life, he can prevent himself from ever making the time machine, thus releasing him

from his present intolerable situation."

On the platform, Bernard Ollin disappeared.

"That man's face," Gan said. "I'll never forget it."

"He will reappear in about five minutes," the guide said. "I will be glad to answer questions during the interval."

"I've got one," Veerdus said, raising his hand.

Bernard Ollin, age ten, squatted on the floor of his room. In front of him was a chemistry set, with test tubes neatly arranged in their holders.

Ollin was following one of the experiments in the booklet that came with the set. Or he had been following it. Something told him that it might be interesting if he added a little more of *this*, instead of quite a lot of *that*.

What a funny reaction!

Ollin stared at the test tube wide-eyed. Then he thumbed through the booklet to find what he had done.

The booklet didn't say anything about it. And now the solution was changing again, in the strangest way.

This was really something, young Ollin said to himself. Now what would happen if—

Ollin's father came in quietly, and looked over his son's shoulder. Mr. Ollin felt that his

son should be out playing, instead of messing with chemicals all day long. But he wasn't going to interfere. He leaned farther, to see what the boy was up to—

And something seemed to push him. In any event Mr. Ollin stumbled, reached out for balance, and knocked over the test tube.

"Oh, dad!" the boy said, in an agonized voice. He ignored his father's apologies, trying to figure out just what chemicals he had mixed. He thought for a few seconds, then nodded to himself.

It would take time, but he would mix that solution again.

Bernard Ollin, fourteen years old, remixed the solution in his workshop in the family garage. He hooked a battery to it, and frowned at what was happening. Ollin's face was already set in its customary scowl.

The boy took a magnet out of his tool box and set it up near the solution. Then he changed its position. Then he changed it again.

The result was unexpected, and very interesting. Ollin wrote it down in a school notebook, then adjusted the magnet a quarter of an inch closer.

He heard a sound, and looked up.



The garage was used by his father as a store house. On the rafters were skis, pieces of canvas, old tools, chairs—odds and ends that his father had no other place for. Something seemed to have nudged a chair loose from its position between two beams. Fascinated, the boy watched it fall.

At the last moment he ducked out of the way. The metal chair smashed across his tubes and battery. The solution ran over his scrawled notes, obliterating them.

The boy swore angrily, then clamped his mouth shut. This, he told himself, was no accident. It couldn't be!

He found fresh paper and doggedly wrote down all he could remember.

The first equations for time travel were emerging.

Bernard Ollin, twenty years old, was unpopular among his fellow students at college. He spent all his spare time in the physics lab, working at some crackbrained theory or another. His physics instructor tolerated him. Ollin was allowed to dabble, as long as he paid for any breakage.

But this day the physics teacher didn't feel so tolerant. His wife had been sarcastic at breakfast. The head of the

physics department had passed him without his usual cool nod. And he had barked his ankle painfully, walking into the physics lab.

With distaste he viewed Ollin's equipment, littering most of the available space.

"You'll have to straighten up this mess," he said testily, wondering why the head of the department hadn't nodded to him. Could he have done something wrong?

"I've almost finished one stage," the young man said. He had been soldering some wires into a machine of some sort. The hot soldering iron was still in his hand.

"I don't know why you—" The teacher howled with pain. The soldering iron had fallen out of Ollin's hand, onto his wrist.

"Get this damned junk out of here!" the teacher shouted. "You'll blow this place up!"

"But sir—" Ollin began. How could he explain that the iron had been pushed out of his hand? How could he tell him about the unseen presences persecuting him? About *them*?

"Get it out," the teacher said, in a firm tone he should have used with his wife an hour earlier.

"Now," the guide said, "Ollin has moved into his own present.

Failing to stop himself anywhere along the line, he is making his last attempt. He is pushing a vacuum tube off the table, hoping that he won't be able to get another. Invisible, he is trying to fuse two wires on the machine."

"But doesn't he realize the truth yet?" someone asked.

"He hasn't had a chance," the guide said. "He has been too intent on what he's doing. But in a moment he will realize the failure of this particular endeavor. With that will come insight."

As they watched, the man from the past appeared again.

"He looks very tired," Gan said.

"He is," Veerdus said. "Just look at that face!" In Ollin's face everyone could see themselves—brutalized. It was a caricature of a human face.

"Everyone looked like that then," Veerdus reminded Gan. She took his hand again.

"Here are the associations again," the guide said. "Watch now. This is a pretty bit of reasoning."

The words began to race across the screen. "Myself—all along — myself — closed — unalterable—"

"Look," Veerdus said. "There's the point of absolute conviction.

He knows that he is his only persecutor."

"I can read," Gan said. But she squeezed his hand, to apologize for being snappy.

In the grayness of the future, Ollin realized that there had been no unseen presences—only himself. He had been the one who had tried to stop the experiments. His own persecutor!

But what did it mean? Was he trapped forever in this gray future?

No. There was something he had left out.

"I tried to get into the future," he said out loud, "And I met a resisting force. What was that force?"

After a moment he had the answer.

"That force was myself also," he decided. "My attempt to get into the future was nullified by myself, trying to get out of the future. The forces cancelled."

Hmm. Complicated. He tried to visualize it as a diagram. There had been three unsuccessful attempts to get into the future. Let that be three horizontal arrows, one under another.

Now then. Opposing those, nullifying them were three other arrows. They represented the times he had tried to get from the future to the past.

"Those three balanced each other," he said out loud. "For each attempt in the past, a simultaneous attempt in the future. And vice versa."

He scratched his head. That was all very well. Now, how had he gotten in?

Draw a fourth arrow, under the three in the past. There is no opposition to that arrow. Continue it around, and hook it up with the first of the future series. That represents me, in position to try to return to the past.

And then he had it!

In that case, my fourth attempt in the future will be unopposed, just as my fourth attempt in the past! The fourth arrow will bring me back!

He laughed, and pushed the button.

The man from the past vanished.

"The poor man," Gan said.

"Let's look around the rest of the museum while we're here," Veerdus said. "There are some remarkable things here. The Catamaro, and the three-in-three—"

"I knew it," Gan said. "I just knew it."

"That's that, folks," the guide was saying. "There is a full explanation in your guide book, plus a detailed analysis of the

Ollin theory of time. But to sum up—"

"I promise we'll dance all night," Veerdus said. "We'll tour the solar system. If you'll just—"

"I'd love to see the three-in-three," Gan said, although she didn't have the slightest idea what it was.

"To sum up," the guide went on, "You have seen the complete time circuit, closed and unalterable. Who knows when this man will be set free? Not until the very fabric of time is worn thin!"

Gan looked at Veerdus, and allowed herself the luxury of a single sexual thought. It was very enjoyable. But she stopped there. Time for that later. Now, she would concentrate on the three-in-three.

Behind them, the guide's voice was saying, "The man from the past will be back in two hours and sixteen minutes. This exhibit is open weekdays and Saturdays until two."

The vacuum tube had been lying motionless on the table for half an hour. Now, for no apparent reason, it started rolling toward the edge. Ollin caught it before it fell, held it a minute uncertainly, then put it in a drawer.

Let *them* try to stop him now!