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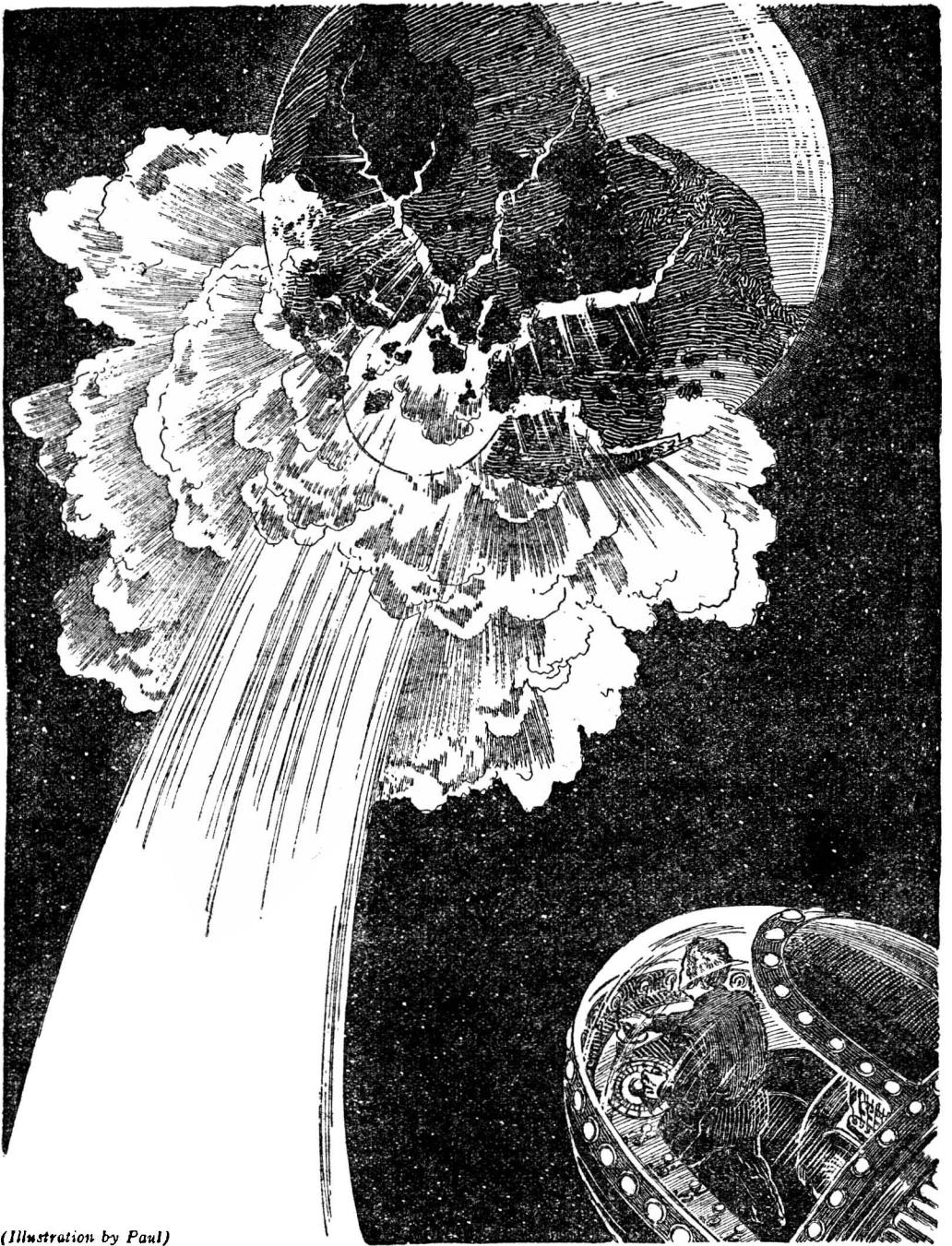
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(Illustration by Paul)

I left when the moon fell. That was a sight to watch!

THE BRANCHES OF TIME

By DAVID R. DANIELS

● I met Bell, James H. Bell, B.S., on the corner by Waller's Drug Store. It was the first time I had seen him in years, since the summer we graduated, in fact.

"You're looking differently," I told him after we had shaken hands. He did, too. He was much more weatherbeaten than he had been. There was a look about him that a lot of these returned explorers, who really do things, have. "Been off on a Polar trip?"

"Something of the sort," he said non-committally. "Drop around some time and I may tell you about it. Or better yet, come home to dinner with me and we'll renew our acquaintance. I've got a vintage now that will make the other you praised look sick."

"I'll accept anything before I'll believe that—unless you show me," I bantered. "Because of that statement, I'll accept your invitation. I'm off for the day, anyhow. Wait a minute while I phone my wife."

I was forced to admit that Bell had told the truth after he dug a cobwebbed bottle out of a cupboard and poured a couple of glasses full from it. So I said, "You win, Bell," and drank to his health.

"Where'd you get it?" I asked when I found its taste escaped me.

"You'd be surprised." I noticed a queer look in Bell's eyes.

Since we had been very intimate in the old days, and because of that look, I said, "Bell, there's something on your chest. What is it?" I can usually tell when someone wants to do a little confiding.

He stood a while before replying. "All right. I will tell," he said at last. "I remember you used to read science fiction as avidly as I did."

● To say that this short story contains some revolutionary time-travel theories would be putting it exceedingly mild.

When the author, new to our magazine, submitted this story to us, his accompanying letter stated that in it he had settled the time-travel question once and for all. We must admit that a broad, unbelieving grin spread over our countenances when the author dared make this assertion.

BUT—the smile soon left our faces after we had perused well into the yarn—for, to our chagrin, Mr. Daniels had really propounded so many brand new ideas about time and time-travel, and such logical ones—that he has not left one loophole in his argument!

You are perhaps smiling at this, as we did at first, but all we ask of you is to read the story, which task you will not find hard, for it is filled with as many thought-provoking theories as any science-fiction novel you have ever read and you will sit for long after finishing it, pondering upon the fantastic possibilities of this new kind of time-travel.

"That was a long time ago," I replied laughingly, "so don't scare me by telling too much about Mars."

His queer look was more that way than ever. "It's worse than that," he warned.

I searched my memory. "Been dancing among the atoms?"

He shook his head. "Way off."

"I give up then, unless it's time."

"You're right."

"Huh?" I said somewhat louder than was polite. "Come here, Bell."

"Oh, I'm perfectly sane," he assured me. "What's more, I'm sober, which you won't be if you take any more of that bottle on an empty stomach. John, we used to be intimate in the old days, so listen to what I have to tell you. I've given you a warning as to what it's about."

"All right," I agreed. "I probably won't believe it, but I'll listen; and I won't laugh."

"Fine; it's no laughing matter to me."

"Fire away, then."

"I will begin with only a little explanation; you already know the theory of time as a fourth dimension with our egos, or consciousnesses moving along our body extenditures in that dimension—also the other theory that it should be possible to move mundane objects in that dimension.

"I started on that and began experimenting with time machines. The idea behind the thing is not so difficult if one understands tesseracts and the principles of them. But, theory or no theory, it's extremely difficult for a three dimensional essence to construct machinery whose four dimensions can be made to move all at the same *absolute time*. However, I finally managed it, though since I've been sure I was only lucky. Maybe, though, I was helped somehow.

"Even now I couldn't explain the machine to you; I'd have to let you see it. As for patenting such a device, I don't think the patent office would allow it. Now what are you laughing about?"

"I was only thinking of the rush if they did. Everybody would be sailing off to find past age gold fields; or if that palled, scientists would go back to study prehistoric animals, while dreamers forged ahead to see how their predictions of Utopia were working out. Why, I'm afraid I'd even give up my practice to join in."

"I'd thought about all that, too," Bell said. "It would mess up civilization worse than it is already, though it wouldn't make any difference in the end."

"Before you start giving us time machines, you ought to break the news gently. Kill George Washington, or save Lincoln from being assassinated at the right instant—or something else of the sort," I offered.

"And if I did, we wouldn't be in the same world-line." Bell paused a few moments. "That brings me to what I want to tell you," he went on. "I don't suppose you'll understand; I don't myself. I can't

tell it properly. But as far as that goes, neither could that man after a hundred thousand years."

"Been that far?"

"Yes. But to get back to the time machine—finally I built some apparatus which I could move in time when I worked certain levers. At first the thing only had a little power—I could go ahead into the future or back into the past at about double rate. Though this thing was an altogether new invention, one still couldn't do enough with it to ever really get out of his own age. And that was what I wanted to do.

"After a year or so of experimenting, I finally made a traveler more powerful. But you see, it still wasn't strong enough, for I wanted to see the remote past and the far future—and a gasoline engine, for such I was experimenting with, couldn't possibly do that. The distance was too far. It would be like trying to drive to the sun in an automobile. However, after Eckleson solved atomic disintegration, I got an atomic engine; then I could move plenty fast."

"Say," I broke in, "just what's all this you're trying to feed me? Who's Eckleson? And atomic power? If you've got that, it's more than anybody else has done."

● Bell looked sheepish. "I made a mistake," he said. "For the second I was mixed up as to when this was. What I meant was that after I'd been working with time machines for a year, I finally found that there's no power today capable of driving one much faster than at the rate of about a year an hour, which is still too slow. But by means of such a machine I was able to go ahead to the year 1987 when a Swede named Eckleson first found how to set free atomic power. I bought one such engine and installed it in my time traveler; and then I was ready to go anywhere. The machine was now able to make over a hundred thousand years a second at top speed, and it would go to the end of the world and back on a few hundred pounds of sand.

"But that was more power, however, than it would take to drive all the ships in existence around and around the world for the next hundred years."

"All very well," I broke in, "but describe your machine to me."

"Oh," said Bell in surprise. "I supposed you'd have an idea of what it would be like. After all the time stories I'd read, I made the thing on the usual lines—enclosed carriage, and all that, and oxygen tanks to supply my own atmosphere in case I ran into a period of noxious gasses.

"Also, after I'd installed the atomic engine, I transferred the whole thing into a twenty-first century flyer. I wanted to penetrate so many ages I knew it wouldn't be safe to stay on the surface of the earth. I might want to stop in some age where I was buried under ground, or in the walls of some great building.

"Speaking of time-traveling, since you want to hear all about it—the sensation is quite like it's been pictured. At first one feels somewhat nauseated and sick in the pit of his stomach—like you feel when an elevator starts down too fast. That's because men's bodies aren't built for too sudden acceleration. But if you apply your power properly, you seem to glide ahead; then it's like flying. After you're moving at even speed, there really isn't much feeling to it—any more than there is to riding in an airplane on even keel. Starting and stopping is nearly always somewhat uncomfortable, and if you're accelerating in time and suddenly fly either upward or downward in three dimensional space, why, it gets you down. Feels like you were being torn apart cell by cell. After I found that out, I always made sure that I was high enough in space before I started moving in time.

"While you're traveling, the sun revolves westward faster and faster, if you are going ahead; if you're going into the past, it moves from west to east. As you gain speed either way, day and night becomes a blur, then the changing colors of seasonal differences, and at very high speeds you move in a gray-white half-light. That's all.

"As I said, I attached an atomic motor in 1987, then I started out to find out what was going to happen.

"It was awful. Cities were springing up everywhere—great towering things like New York on Gargantuan style. There were buildings that covered a square mile of ground and reached two miles high by the year 2050. The world had gone building mad and the people were at nearly the same social status as ever—lots of quarreling, little governments, and uneducated masses and all that. The countries were always close to fighting among themselves, which would have been like children settling their differences with machine guns and hand grenades.

"I was sure that before long there wouldn't be any world—or rather, any world of mankind, and I was right. There were fleets by that time which could go thousands of miles an hour; there were war horrors which could blow a hundred-mile city off the face of the earth in three seconds.

"Of course, they were always talking about peace, but anyone with half an eye could see that the treaties they were making wouldn't last.

"The end came when the United States and Japan, which by then had spread over nearly all Asia, declared war on each other in 2083. That was the war our philosophers have been prophesying when the East would be arrayed against the West. The whole world joined in. Both sides were about equal—the two Americas, Australia, and Europe had fewer people than the other side, but their men were better educated as a whole and therefore knew how to kill each other better.

"New York, Hongkong, London, Bombay, Melbourne, Berlin, and Rio de Janeiro were destroyed the first day, and that was only a start. They contained over a hundred million people all told. But that many killed didn't make any difference. It went on while the leaders and instigators of the thing stayed back out of sight where they couldn't be touched and where they kept working on the soldiers and keeping

them at it until everybody was destroyed."

"Not everyone!" I echoed, horror-stricken.

"Yes, everyone. There's a lot of talk these days about how in the next war the face of man will be destroyed. It will be the truth if that war doesn't come till 2083."

"But you just said it did happen," I contradicted.

"I know. But listen, and you'll see why I say 'if.'"

"Right now there is a lot of talk on the subject of wars and it has been said that any great war these days would wipe the race out. However, we aren't far enough advanced, in a mechanical way, to kill everyone. You see, after so much fighting, the horror of the thing strikes everyone and they leave off. Peace is made for that reason.

"By then, they were, though—not that people were any worse then than now, but because of the fact that they could destroy such great quantities of things in so short a time. When a long enough space had passed that the people should be sick of killing each other, there wasn't anyone left to stop it. The carnage died for lack of fuel.

"As I say; it ruined the world. It was because the leaders of the thing had stayed back out of sight until nearly everybody else was dead—though even then they came out of their burrows too soon. If they had been wiped out early in the game, the war might have run itself out, since without leaders there would have to have been a cessation before they all died.

"But that wasn't the way it went. So finally, when the agitators did come out, there was only one fighting man, one soldier left. The war hadn't stayed to the trenches and the air above them; each side had bombed non-combatants, women and children, and everybody, and none could escape. Only the single soldier remained, who was a decent sort though he had destroyed a few cities single-handed. He went into hiding to see what would happen.

● "Everybody in South America was dead, in Australia, and in Africa. There were a group of eight or nine who had entrenched themselves in the Rocky Mountains west of Denver; there were the same number in the Alps in Switzerland, and another group in the Indian Himalayas. All told they numbered about two dozen.

"When that fighting man—Lark his name was, I believe—found that out and realized that these people had been the cause of the whole carnage, he gathered a few bombs, took them by surprise, and killed all them off too—first those in America, then Europe, then in Asia.

"And being the only human being left on earth, he did the only thing there was left for him to do—he put a gun to his head and blew his brains out."

"But surely," I said, "a few men and women must have been left somewhere—savages on tropical islands, perhaps, or Eskimos in the far north. It seems that someone would have escaped."

"I hoped so," Bell answered. "In fact I flew almost all over the world to find out. But not a soul was to be seen, and finally I went ahead in time, pausing every now and then till I had reached a million years. There was a sort of civilization of ants by that time. They had built houses and machinery and had learned the use of fire. But to me they didn't seem right. It was all dreary and lonesome with nothing but a tiny realm of ants. Nearly all the large animals had been killed too, you see.

"But I kept on until the year when the moon fell; I don't know how many millions of years that was. I had lost track, but it must have been a hundred or two hundred, I think, at least.

"I kept hoping that men might show up, but they never did, and the ants were too small to evolve very far. Their size wasn't large enough according to earth. They finally built little ships and flyers capable of crossing the oceans, but to do that took them an awfully long time. I don't suppose they ever realized there

were other worlds in the sky or tried to reach them.

"I don't know, though. I left when the moon fell. That was a sight to watch! It happened on the night side of the planet. At first it seemed to be growing larger and larger; then there was a roaring in the air like an enormous steam whistle coming closer. Just before it struck I jumped ahead a day in time so the concussion wouldn't hurt me or affect my ship.

"Great cracks had opened in the earth, I found when I looked. The days were made much longer. But the ants went on as ever. A few of them were killed, naturally; but as a race they were too strong in proportion to their weight for the jar to have much effect."

"God," I broke in, overwhelmed for the moment. "If I had found things like that, I would have taken the same way out that last man did!"

"You mean Lark? I came close to it. Watching the horrors of the latter part of the twenty-first century was enough to make anybody sick of his race and of living. But you see, I had the means and the urge to see what came of it. By the time I'd left it all behind about a million years I was thinking of something else.

"It was this way—" Bell stopped, pausing indecisively a moment or two. "Now," he began, "comes the really hard part. But it's beyond me. All I can do is tell it as it occurred.

"As I said, I got to thinking. I had seen it all happen. I had been right there. I knew that I could have an effect on the future because my time machine was powered by an atomic motor, and I moved in common, ordinary space by means of a twenty-first-century flyer. Also, I'd been eating food from animals and plants born long after I should have died a natural death.

"Finally I thought, 'Why couldn't I change it?' And the more I thought of it, the more I came to the conclusion that I could. The only trouble was that I didn't know where to begin.

"I came back to the time of the last war and watched it all carefully. After seeing it two or three times, I picked Lark as the most likely person.

"You see, I'd decided that the two dozen or so leaders who were left when everybody besides Lark had died might be able to remedy things. They were the best educated of the day, and while they were responsible for the thing, they had the best minds.

"I decided to act on the evening Lark had decided he'd blow them up the next day. I went to him right after he'd gone to sleep. You understand, I didn't want to take any chances with him, for I knew he was half insane and I didn't want to die until I saw what came of my decision, anyway.

"I found him sleeping in a ruined building. I didn't try to parley with him or talk him out of it; I shone a light into his face and said, 'Hands up!'

"He awoke with a start. He was so surprised to see a living man that he didn't know what to do, and by the time he realized what was going on, I had snapped two pairs of handcuffs on him—one pair on his wrists and another on his ankles. Then I bundled him into the time-traveler, where, after grunting a few times, he went back to sleep. I believe he was drunk anyway. The solitude was beginning to pall on him and he had to have some outlet.

"With this much accomplished, I went ahead a few days to see what would happen. Sure enough, as I had thought, the two dozen had sense enough to try to fix things up after they had wrecked them. They had all the resources of the world at their fingertips; and what's more, they had the knowledge of how to use those things properly. They didn't try to get together—each group kept a continent to itself and started in.

"It was too slow watching what they did. When I saw that they were headed right, I jumped ahead a hundred years. There were a number of people by that time, comparatively, and all were working toward real civilization. In a thousand years they were ahead of any point

their ancestors had ever reached, and there hadn't been any more wars.

"They had all the machines they needed to begin with, so they started in for mental progress and they accomplished it. Utopia didn't come at once, but everybody was at the same social level, and that was all that was needed for them to start pushing out toward the stars."

"But what became of Lark?" I wanted to know.

"He hadn't wakened up even then. I had seen all this, you know, in a few hours, according to my own figuring. I didn't want to keep him with me, so I finally unfastened his handcuffs and dumped him off about five hundred years after I took him on. I still had his welfare in mind, though, so I went ahead ten years to see how he was making out.

"As I said, he was a decent sort. By the time he'd sobered up and found that he hadn't gone crazy, he started out to make himself useful. When I looked him up in ten years, I found him a progressive citizen; in fifty more he died an honored death. By any measure he was quite an old man by that time, and they remembered him several generations."

● I had lighted a cigar, but it was cold and forgotten between my teeth by now. The tale was so full of paradoxes that I could make neither head nor tail of it. "But how could it happen like that?" I objected. "You just said a few moments ago that Lark and everybody died before 2200; now you tell how Lark passed out again and was remembered by those who followed him in what must have been 2600 or 2700."

"That's where the difficulty comes in; they had all been dead. You see, I changed the world." Bell spoke as nonchalantly as a god in his well modulated, though somewhat jerky speech. "Everybody who has ever lived has changed things somewhat. Think how much Christ did, or Mohammed, or for that matter, Alexander and Caesar. You, too, have, around here. Think how different things would have

been if you had died when you were three years old."

When I thought of how the papers howled at what they called my "radical changes" the year I was elected coroner, I was forced to admit that Bell was right. "It's so," I said. "But all this *has* happened; it couldn't be any different."

"So you think," Bell said. "But chew on this: I was in a world of no-humans a hundred million years after the last man died. I saw the moon fall. Everything up to then had happened as I saw it happen; but I went back and changed it, and all history turned out another way."

He chuckled. "Naturally I was all balled up. Here two different histories had unfolded beneath my eyes, and both were real. Now anybody I ask will say the future *can* happen, or *may*, or *will* happen in numberless ways. But it didn't seem so to me, since I had proven to myself that it would happen one way; then I proceeded to strike it all out, and the first way I had seen wasn't it at all.

"The only answer I could see was that *time itself* must be happening in a higher dimension, and that nothing was so sure that it couldn't be changed—or ever has been so sure. That was the way I theorized it, but still it didn't make sense.

"Nevertheless, people were coming along wonderfully, now that I had stopped Lark's little episode. I thought that if things went on as they should, I could see a really advanced people in a hundred thousand years. I went ahead to see what they could do for me.

"When I stopped my time machine, I found everything beyond my small comprehension. As you know, the only civilizations of men that I had come in contact with were no further advanced than a hundred or a thousand years beyond my time. Naturally, there were things now, a hundred thousand years later, that I couldn't even begin to understand. It was like bringing one of our tree-dwelling ancestors out of the fern forests and showing him our twentieth century civilization.

"Don't ask me to give in details what I saw; I can't. People all lived in the

grassy country. There wasn't a sign, usually, of anything Mother Nature herself hadn't provided, yet when those folks wanted a machine or a piece of apparatus, they had it. Maybe they could think such things into existence. Or again, maybe they kept such things somewhere beyond time and brought them out as they chose to. I know they understood dimensions in a way I never will because I haven't sufficient brain power.

"They knew I was coming to see them, and a man was ready to meet me when I materialized. He was taller than I"—Bell stood over six feet—"and he was built like Apollo. His head was like what the gods must have. Honestly, he seemed almost a deity to me. It made me feel proud too, since if it hadn't been for my help, he and his kind never would have existed.

"His face was ultra-human. He looked at me in a benign sort of way, as though he understood everything which ever had been or might ever be.

"So you have come, James Bell," was all he said. He didn't speak in English; I'm not sure he even talked, but I understood, nevertheless.

"I was expecting to be greeted as savior of the race, but when nothing of the sort happened, I wasn't surprised. I don't suppose I'll ever be surprised at anything from now on.

"Yes, I have come," I replied.

"And you wish to understand time?" He came to the point at once.

"I do," I said.

"With that he began an explanation, but right away he saw that it wouldn't work. Even though I'd invented the time-traveler, I still didn't have the brains to comprehend what he wanted to tell me. As I've said, I only hit upon the machine by accident.

"The man's massive brow furrowed a little. 'Come,' he said after a moment of thought. 'We shall go back.' With that he led the way to my time-traveler.

"He ran the ship. It was he who knew where we were going, and he understood time much better than I did. My time traveler accelerated very smoothly in his

hands, and he kept going faster until everything was a blur. He left the lever far over for a long time. I knew we were going back almost to the end of the world.

"When we stopped, the sun was a steaming red ball, huge in a cloudy sky. The mountains were all sheer peaks, the tides five times that of the highest today. The forests were only gigantic ferns.

● "My companion—I call him that, since

I never learned his name—seemed to know what he was doing. He guided the ship over a range of mountains and down into a little bowl-shaped valley almost completely surrounded by mile-high crags. There were a few trees here and a little stream flowing among them between sandy banks. We stopped on the sand right before an egg-shell from which a reptile-thing had just hatched. It was four-legged and scaly and crawled around blinking its eyes. It wasn't all lizard and was one of the most ugly things I had ever seen.

"Kill it," the man said and handed me—wonder of wonders—a revolver. Where he got it from is another mystery.

"He had engendered such a feeling of respect in me, I believe, that if he had told me to shoot myself I would have done so. I took the revolver and killed the thing—shot it in the head.

"Now we will go forward in time," my companion said.

"Again he accelerated the ship, and we shot ahead a few million years—to about a period analogous with the building of the great pyramid, I think.

"But when we stopped, there weren't any pyramids; there weren't any men. The whole world was inhabited only by reptiles.

"For, you see, I had killed the thing that was a direct ancestor of the first mammal; and it happened that no other animal like it developed after that.

"With one bullet, I killed my companion and myself, killed all men, even all warm-blooded animals, in fact. I killed all such things that would ever live—had ever lived, really, for I'm alive, and you're alive, and right then I was in the com-

pany of a man who should normally have lived a hundred thousand years after I died.

"See what you have done?" he said with a laugh. Then knowing that I was utterly in the dark, he explained. 'But it has all been—this world, your world, the world of the ants, my world. They all exist in the absolute time of the Cosmos, and the possibilities of what have been or what may be are manifold, like tree branches—one moves along one limb and thinks it is the tree; but when he proceeds to another, lo, it is all different.'

"Still, though, its reality was beyond me. True, I could get an inkling of it, but the whole was too wonderful. If I had gone ahead millions of years instead of hundreds of thousands for my explanation, I might have run onto beings capable of making me understand.

"But I hadn't; and though my companion seemed god-like, his brain was only greater than mine by degrees. He understood time and such things in a way I never could, yet there were lots of things in his scheme of the absolute as far beyond him as death is beyond me. There were all sorts of theories around him whose meaning he couldn't grasp. For that matter, however far a creature may develop, whatever he may learn, his knowledge only shows him a multitude of other things to turn his attention to. . . .

"For awhile we explored the world of the reptile races. We went ahead for ages, until the sun was growing cold, in fact. And"—here Bell's voice lowered a note—"in that world the moon never did fall; it just broke into pieces which formed rings around the earth like those around Saturn.

"Before the end there was a race of reptiles nearly as far advanced as the man with me. When there wasn't enough solar heat coming in to make Earth habitable, they migrated to the planets circling some other star, and that was the last we ever saw of them. My companion and I never did show ourselves, however. As with the ant-world, there was something about their civilization which made me home-

sick. I didn't want to have anything to do with them—nor, for that matter, did the man with me. There are a few ways in which people will never change, I think, not so long as the *genus homo* remain in human form. I'm speaking of our world-line now

"Finally we went back to where the reptile-thing was hatching on the sands in the earth's childhood. There we waited for about a minute, then my time machine appeared in front of us.

"It's a fact! Though the future-man and I were standing together inside the transparent walls of the traveler, he and I and it all appeared in front of ourselves. I saw; it was like looking at the moving picture of one's self, though much weirder.

"My friend gave the other me the revolver. We were too far away to hear what we said, but the actions were all plain. The other me stepped out to shoot our ancestor.

"Now stop yourself," the man told me.

"So, as though I were used to doing this every day, I walked over to my other self and said, 'Don't do it this time.' I took the revolver. I suppose the other Bell was too dumfounded to do more than gape as I threw it into the stream. After that my companion and I went off in the time-machine leaving ourselves by our traveler on the sand. I've often wondered what might have happened had we all got into the same machine and left the other one that was still it on the edge of that little stream. . . .

"Now things were as they had been before, since our ancestor lived and thrived. We passed the place where I had kidnapped Lark, and since I did nothing to stop that action, we went on to the era of my companion.

"I was beginning to see something besides black in the ink by now. All I can say, however, is that the world has innumerable dimensions in the Cosmos, and that each one of those dimensions seems very different to us who see only three dimensional cross-cuts of them at a time. We and our world are like things seen by

some one dimensional being. What, for instance, could such a creature make of an automobile, being able to see no more than a line along its surface. That's how we look at infinity.

"I live, and yet I've seen the world which is this planet peopled by nothing besides races of reptiles, a world into which I couldn't possibly be born. And probably somewhere—in the Cosmos—there is a *me*, a James Bell who never invented a time-machine, but lived a normal twentieth-century life as the other men around him did. However, I know nothing of that, since at present—in absolute time—the ego-which-I-am inhabits the body of the Bell who did travel into time.

"But that there are other Bell-egos, I know. For instance, there was the *me* I took the revolver from. Both men were Bell, yet in my consciousness there is no memory of that incident when the gun was taken away from me. And as to what that Bell did after that, I have no idea.

"Very probably there is a you, John, who has traveled in time with me, whether you ever do in this consciousness of yourself or not. And as far as that goes, there may have been a planet Earth which fell into the sun ere it cooled, or was stolen by a passing star.

"Well, this absolute theory of time-traveling, which must be the right one, takes away certain of the paradoxes which have baffled imaginative people. Still, you can't really understand it. But there will always be things like that, no matter what we know.

"But if one follows that thought out, he can come to almost any conclusion.

"That's nearly all of the story. After I took my companion back to his age, I returned here. However, I first overshot the mark a hundred years, so I stopped in at a mansion and acquired exactly seven bottles of beverage like you drank tonight. Perhaps the episode has gone down in history as an unsolved wine mystery.

"I returned here because I wanted a space in which to think it all out before I go gazing into infinity again. When I

do go back, I believe I shall penetrate into the future until I meet beings who are capable of teaching me the real reasons behind some of my questions. There must be such entities somewhere, if they will let me find them.

"I did have an idea to get together a band of future-men and go back to make past ages more liveable. Terrible things have happened in history, you know.

"But it isn't any use. Think, for instance, of the martyrs and the things they suffered. I could go back and save them those wrongs. And yet all the time, somewhere in absoluteness, they would still have known their unhappiness and their agony, because, in this world-line, those things have happened.

"At the end, it's all unchangeable; it merely unrolls before us."

● Bell stopped here; and at that moment, the summons came that dinner was served. I believe that neither of us spoke during the meal.

After we had finished, he asked, "Do you want to see my time-machine?"

I had been thinking it over, and my mind was made up. "No," I told him. "Like you did, I want a space in which to think it all over. As it is, I only have what you told me on the subject, no real proof. If you showed me such a machine, then I would know that part of your story, at least, was fact; and that would be the end of my peace. Or if there is no such machine, it would destroy the wonderful illusion you created."

"But I'm going into the future again," Bell said, "perhaps tonight."

"All right," I returned, "go. Maybe it would be better if you didn't come back to me, for I have a wife and a family and a life here which should be lived. I couldn't ever attend to such mundane things again if I saw happenings such as you relate."

I laughed. "Here I am speaking as though I were sure every word you had spoken were gospel fact. I'm making a fool of myself."

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THE BRANCHES OF TIME

By David R. Daniels

(Continued from page 303)

I glanced at my watch. "Well, Bell, I must be going. Thanks for the amusement I received from listening to your little piece of fiction. Let me see you again some time. Drop in and see us all, soon."

"I understand," my friend said as I was putting on my coat. "I believe I shall come back for you."

He was holding open the door for me when he spoke again.

"Yes, I'll be back for you," he said again. "That is, unless I succeed in doing what I hope to. Maybe after that, I won't be able to—or I will see a reason not to. Do you see what I mean?"

"I don't know," I said as the door closed behind me.

THE END