

Traveller

When the envelope dropped through my letter box, I was half inclined to throw it, unopened, into the waste bin. Since I had won a large sum of money, several million pounds, on the National Lottery a month earlier, I had been inundated with begging letters, others offering financial advice and yet more inviting, even begging, me to become the Life President of this society or that, all written in the hope of securing some sizeable share of my fortune. Most of those had already found a home in the bin.

However, some instinct, I don't know what, prompted me instead to open it. What I found inside was a fairly discreetly printed handbill, which read as follows:

Timeshifter Travel

“Taking travel to a new dimension.”

For the first time this century, we are delighted to be able to offer a select group of people the opportunity to journey, not only to any place in this, or even some other, world, but also to any time since the world began.

If you wish to explore your possible participation in this unique adventure, please telephone 01--- 421214 and speak with one of our personal consultants to arrange an appointment.

As you may imagine, my first reaction was one of incredulity, quickly followed by the suspicion that someone was playing an ingenious practical joke at my expense. With this in mind, I laid aside the leaflet in order to examine the envelope for some clue as to the sender, only to find that I could not see it anywhere.

I am a bachelor with no servants and meticulous habits, one of which is to place opened letters in a neat pile to the right-hand side of my desk, and the envelopes in which they came in a similarly neat pile on the left, in order to remove the stamps to save them for a charity.

This being the case, you will understand that I was extremely puzzled to note that the envelope was not on top of the pile of other envelopes which I had previously opened that day. In the vague hope that some stray draught might have wafted it onto the floor, I made a thorough search of the area around the foot of my desk, but without success.

By now thoroughly intrigued, I turned my attention once more to the handbill and found, to my complete astonishment, that it now contained a further paragraph:

In the anticipation that you might conclude that this offer was not altogether serious, we have arranged a small demonstration of our abilities, which we trust has whetted your appetite to learn more. If you choose to look for the envelope again, you will find that it is now precisely where you expected it to be.

And so it was!

It would have been a person of stern, even iron, resolve who could have allowed the leaflet's invitation to go unheeded after that, and my will is of a lesser order, so I did as I was invited and dialled the number. The telephone was answered by a warm, pleasant lady's voice. (Somehow it would seem wrong to say a woman's voice; this was definitely a lady.) "Ah, Mr Kelsford. How kind." (There was no trace of an accent, but somehow the diction was a little too perfect.) "I have been anticipating your call. You wish to make an appointment." This was less of a question than a statement, as though she knew my intention before she had lifted the receiver.

"Yes, but how...." I began. Firmly but politely, she continued, "All in good time. These matters are a little....complex, and best discussed face to face rather than through the impersonal medium of a telephone. Let me see. Yes, 3pm on Tuesday next would be quite convenient, I believe." By this time, I was convinced that either she was aware of what my movements were going to be, or that I was beginning to suffer from some severe form of delusion.

Finding the former a more acceptable alternative, I agreed that that would be convenient, and she went on, "You will find our office at 27c High Street. Please do not be concerned that you have never noticed a number 27c in the past. You will be able to find it without difficulty next Tuesday, but please be prompt," then, almost as an afterthought, "time and tide wait for no man." Then she was gone, leaving me holding the telephone and feeling a little foolish, but with my curiosity raised to fever pitch.

You may imagine in what state of mental turmoil, unease and anticipation I passed the few intervening days, and how long each day seemed until Tuesday, then 3pm arrived and I found myself outside the offices of Timeshifter Travel at 27c High Street. As predicted, I found the address easily, despite the fact that I had walked past that same place not half an hour earlier and seen no trace of it!

The door had nothing about it to mark it as anything out of the ordinary; a solid looking, neatly painted door, the lower part panelled with painted plywood and the upper part consisting mainly of frosted glass, on which was etched, then painted in gold, 'Timeshifter Travel' and, under that, '27c High Street'. On entering, I felt a vague, though not unpleasant, sense of a slight light-headedness, then I found myself in a clean and light hallway.

This seemed to be a little too bright to be lighted solely by the daylight entering by the glass panel, even allowing for the fact that there was bright sunlight outside, and yet I could see no other source of light. At the end of the hallway was a wooden panelled door, on which was a discreet notice inviting me to 'Please knock and enter.'

I did so, and found myself in a comfortably furnished room, carpeted with a plain, pale brown carpet. To either side of the door, there was a sofa, and in front of me, with a window behind it, was a large, solid-looking, kneehole desk, with a comfortable chair facing my side of it, and a man was sitting behind the desk. It was difficult, because of

the light from the window, to see his features clearly, and so to form any initial idea of his age or appearance.

The man gestured towards the chair with a gentle sweep of his arm and, in a rich, warm voice, said, "Good afternoon, Mr Kelsford. Thank you for coming. Please take a seat. No doubt you have many questions you wish to ask, but I should be most grateful if you would permit me first to explain what it is that you are being offered. If, when I have finished, you still have questions, I shall do my best to answer them. You have a degree in history."

I started to open my mouth to ask how he knew that, but he gently raised his hand to silence me, and I let the question lie unanswered, unspoken, and he continued, "Your studies have brought you into contact with many characters long dead and you have witnessed events which took place long ago, through the first-hand accounts of people who were alive when those events occurred.

This must have produced in you a desire to know more about those people and events. Imagine then, what it would be like to be able to go back through time and meet face-to-face the people of whom at present your knowledge comes only through books. Imagine the possibility of being able to speak with them,; to be your own eye-witness to those events.

If you prefer, think of being able to move forward in time and witness events which have yet to take place, and of the extraordinary power and wealth which the foreknowledge of such events would place before you. It is precisely those opportunities which are now on offer to you. Travel through time has long existed as a theoretical possibility; it has now become a practical reality.

My associates and I have developed a means by which the fabric of the space-time continuum, of your physical world, can be manipulated in such a way as to create a slight and quite localised disturbance of that continuum. By creating this disturbance, we can enable you to step outside of your own time and enter the past or the future, at a date chosen by you.

The means by which we create the disturbance need not interest you and indeed, you would not be able to grasp their complexity, even if we chose to reveal them to you. It is enough for you to know that the effect is completely effective and equally completely safe. You are the living proof of that last statement, since you have already experienced the effects of such a disturbance.

This room, this building, do not exist in your part of space and time. When you entered our portal, and I use that term advisedly, since that is what it is, you left your own time behind. Of course, there is a purely financial cost involved in accepting the offer before you. That cost is 1 million pounds!"

I sat silent, open-mouthed, for a few moments after he had finished speaking, while I tried to consider, first, the probability of all that he had said being true and, second, if it were, all the possible benefits, and problems, which might flow from it. He (I did not learn his name) allowed me a few moments for silent reflection, then went on, "£1

million is a considerable sum of money and you may well consider, quite reasonably, that one trip, even through time, would not appear to be a satisfactory return for such an investment. Nor would we.

The offer is for unlimited travel through time to any period of your choice; indeed to, and from, several periods of your choosing. In preparation, through our 'local' offices, which you will easily recognise as being similar in 'appearance', if you will forgive me that little joke, we shall provide you with the clothes and money, if you choose a time during which currency is in use, appropriate to the period, to enable you to blend in with the inhabitants.

In return, we would ask that you keep any interaction with those inhabitants to a minimum. It is inevitable that your presence as an observer will have some effect; we wish to minimise that effect as far as possible, and ask your co-operation in doing so. Now, do you have any questions?"

By this time, my mind was such a maze of contradicting thoughts and emotions that I could scarcely think straight, but after a few moments I managed to say, "Yes, I still have one or two questions; when could I start? When would you want the money? How would you want the money?"

He smiled. I don't know how I knew that he was smiling; as I mentioned earlier, I couldn't see his face for the light behind him, but somehow, I just knew. He said, "These are perfectly natural questions and simply answered. When could you start? We should need a few days to get you the right money and see that you are properly dressed for the period – say one week from today. By the bye, which period would you like to visit?"

Again I thought for a few moments, then I said, "Just recently I have been reading quite a lot about the Victorians, and in particular about Disraeli. His life seems to have been a mass of contradictions, and I should like to meet him and find out what he was really like."

He said, "An excellent choice. In answer to your other two questions, we should expect you to make payment by way of a cheque on the day of your departure. Now, as to the arrangements. We have an excellent outfitter in London. Here is the address. Tell them that you require several outfits for day and evening wear, but stress that they must be completely authentic as to cut, material etc. We have an account with them and they will be happy to charge the cost to that account. Come here again at the same time one week from today with those clothes and one cheque, not the whole cheque book, and nothing else from this time. Good day."

In a daze, I rose from the chair, said goodbye and walked out of the office, down the hall and out of the entrance door. Finding myself in the street and unsure as to how I came to be there, I turned towards the door through which I had just left, but there was no sign that it had ever existed. More confused than ever, I went home to a meal of which I remember nothing and a sleepless night spent tossing and turning.

The following morning I was up early and walked the short distance to the railway station, where I caught the first train to London and went straight to the address of the outfitters. I walked up and down outside for a while, then, taking my courage in both hands, I went in and up to a solicitous middle-aged man in a plain dark grey suit.

He showed no surprise when I handed him the card I had been given and explained what I wanted. On the contrary, he seemed to regard it as the most natural request in the world. Encouraged by this, I asked whether they had been dealing with Timeshifter Travel very long. "Oh yes, sir. They have had an account with us for a number of years."

He seemed mildly amused, but not at all offended, that I should have found it necessary to ask the question. Calmly and efficiently, he took my measurements, then asked, "What period had you in mind sir?" Stifling an urge to laugh, brought on by the unreality of the situation, I replied, "I shall require a full travelling wardrobe suitable to the late nineteenth century."

"If you would care to take a seat for a little while, I shall see what we have in stock sir." With these words, he disappeared into the inner recesses of the building, and returned about 25-30 minutes later, bearing armfuls of clothes, all of which appeared to be totally new. One by one, I tried on the selection and found that every garment fitted as though it had been tailored to my exact requirements. Under any normal circumstances, I should have found this quite uncanny, but by now I was firmly convinced that 'Timeshifter Travel' could accomplish anything.

I had finished trying on the last item, which fitted as perfectly as every other, and was about to say that I would call again to collect them when I had been able to buy a suitable looking suitcase, when Mr Arbuthnot, as I found he was called, said, "No doubt you will require a large valise, sir." Without the slightest hesitation, he produced from behind a counter a roomy, brass-bound case which comfortably held all the clothes, which he proceeded to pack neatly into it. Without even consulting me, he included a gentleman's travelling toilet set, again in a leather case.

With a slightly condescending, "I believe that you will find that this includes all that you require, sir," he ushered me to the door, hailed a passing cab and saw me safely installed with my new possessions, then retreated into his lair. I just sat back as though what I was contemplating was the most usual and natural thing in the world, and allowed the cab to carry me back to the station, where I caught my train home.

I had been requested to take with me, on my next visit to 27c High Street, nothing but one cheque, detached from the cheque book, with which to make the required payment, and my 'new' clothes, and to wear only a track suit over a pair of Victorian underpants.

The following Tuesday, I walked into the office and was again invited, by the same man, to sit down. "Now," he said quietly, "I believe that we are ready. If you would please make out the cheque for one million pounds to 'Timeshifter Travel', I shall explain all the arrangements to you. Oh," he continued, one small favour, if you would be so kind. Please would you date the cheque to one week past; the date of your first visit? Thank

you. Through the door by which you entered this room you will now find a dressing room. Please use it to change from your modern clothes into something from your suitcase, then return to this room.”

Feeling by now that no matter what I said or tried to do, the result would inevitably be the same, I did as I was asked. When I returned, the man said, “This time when you leave the room, you will find yourself again in the hallway. When you walk out into the street, you will find a hansom cab waiting to transport you to the Albemarle Hotel, just off the Strand in London, where a room has been reserved for you for as long as you wish.

An account has been opened for you with Brown’s Bank, and here is one hundred pounds. Please remember that in 1890, this is a considerable sum of money, and use it frugally at first, spending no more than is necessary, in order to avoid calling attention to yourself.

As the days and weeks go by, and you begin to feel more at home in your new surroundings, you may allow yourself a little more freedom. If, at any time, you should wish to call a halt to your visit and return to your own time, please the following notice in *The Times*,” and he handed me a piece of paper which read ‘Would Mrs Alice Mary Biggs, lately of The Limes, Richmond, Surrey, please contact Messrs Jones, Smith and Jones, solicitors for the late Edmond Hough, when she will hear something to her advantage.’

A few minutes later, I cautiously emerged from the door of 27c High Street to find myself in a street in Victorian London, with a cab waiting, as predicted, to take me to the Albemarle Hotel. It took me a few days to settle into a routine, during which period I obeyed the rules of the game and spent as little as necessary, but then I gradually began to adopt the lifestyle of a reasonably well-to-do man about town of independent means. By day, I would saunter round to one or other of the museums or galleries; by night, I enjoyed a substantial and lengthy dinner, or visited a theatre or one of the better Music Halls.

It was not long before I began to make the acquaintance of a number of other gentlemen of similar standing, and beginning to climb the social ladder. I had visited the public gallery of the House of Commons on a number of occasions, to observe the reason for my embarking on this remarkable experience. I was finding life increasingly pleasant, when my pleasure was abruptly curtailed.

It was a fine autumn afternoon and I was crossing the Strand, on my way back to my hotel to take tea and decide how to spend the evening. My thoughts were elsewhere, and the absence of motor vehicles had made me somewhat heedless of the possible dangers of crossing the road, when I was knocked over by a passing cart which I had not noticed.

Dr Seddon finished reading and laid the manuscript down on his writing desk. “That is a verbatim transcript of my notes of our interviews. Once I had convinced him that I was prepared to listen to, and probably believe, what he had to tell me, he began to open up to me, and this was the result.” “How did he come to be here?” asked Dr Perkis.

“Oh, that’s simple enough; a tragic case, I’m afraid. As the poor fellow fell, he struck his head and had to be taken to the nearest hospital, where he was detained for observation. He was unconscious for a few days, during which time he seemed to be rambling. The doctor in charge of his case was a good man, a Dr Klensman. At first he thought little of it, attributing his strange utterances to the effects of his injuries, but when he recounted the same story as he began to recover, the good doctor felt there was cause to fear for his sanity. He contacted me and I had him brought here.

“And have you made efforts to find where he really came from?” “Oh yes. We examined his clothes and found some visiting cards which gave his address as the Albemarle Hotel, just off the Strand. We also found a considerable sum of money in his pocket book; £43.” “But surely that bears out his story?” “Yes, but it is not unusual; in such cases the sufferer often weaves elements of reality into the delusion, thereby making it easier to believe.

Bearing this in mind, I visited the hotel and, with the consent of the Manager, who was as concerned as I for his well-being, examined his rooms. We found nothing beyond the piece of paper of which he had told me; no doubt another strand of truth woven into the fabric of the delusion.”

“But surely,” asked Mr Perkis, “that might have yielded some clue?” “That was our hope,” continued his friend, “so we duly inserted the notice in the next day’s edition of The Times, in an attempt to see whether anyone would come forward in response, but, alas, without result.”

“Would it be possible for me to see the remarkable man who claims to come from the future?” asked Dr Perkis. “Ah,” Dr Seddon replied, “I’m afraid that will not be possible.” “Why,” rejoined Dr Perkins, “is he likely to be violent?” “Oh no,” came the embarrassed reply, “It’s just that....well....I’m afraid he is no longer here.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand. If he is not here, where is he?” In a tone of even greater embarrassment, Dr Seddon replied, “I....I don’t know. I had assigned one man to look after him, as he was such an unusual case, but three days ago, the day after the advertisement appeared, the man was suddenly taken ill and was unable to work, though he is now fully recovered. We had to get another man in to take over the task, but some time last night both Kelsford and his guardian disappeared and we have been unable to trace either of them. Furthermore, all his personal possessions have disappeared, from both here and the hotel.”

“You don’t suppose,” Dr Perkis began, very tentatively. “My dear fellow,” said Dr Seddon, “I have no doubt that a perfectly logical and reasonable explanation for all this will be found; one which fits all the few facts we have. If you or I were to indulge in such wild speculation as, I fear, you were about to suggest, we should very soon cease to be respectively the superintendent and doctor in charge of this establishment, and become patients instead. No, my dear fellow, the whole notion is totally impossible!”