

A
MOMENT OF TIME

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THE VANISHING MAN

“EUREKA!” the Professor cried, and disappeared.

I was hardly prepared for this.

Mathematical professors are not magicians, and have no business to vanish suddenly and without due warning. Moreover, at the moment of his disappearance, there was a curious whistling explosion, a sound like that of igniting hydrogen ; of air rushing into a vacuum : the papers on his desk were caught up in a sudden whirlwind and pirouetted for several seconds over the floor. For a moment I was too dazed by the concussion to think clearly : then I got up and rushed rather wildly about the room. For it is difficult for any man to be sure how he would act when so astonished.

But I had hardly assured myself that there was really no bodily trace of him left in the study where we were working together, when I noticed a pair of boots on the hearth-rug. Now it is one thing for an agitated man to see a pair of boots on the hearth-rug, and to go to put them in a corner without really giving them a thought : but it is a very different matter to find a pair of feet in those boots, sharply severed at the ankle ; with bone, flesh, veins, skin, and sock cut as clean and clear as in a sectional diagram. For a few moments I simply

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stared : then one of these boots moved, almost an inch. I confess that I was very nearly frightened. I made a rush for the door, but conquered my nerves and turned back again : and lo ! while my back had been turned, a pair of legs—trousered legs—the Professor's trousers—had attached themselves to the boots. And they were growing !

They were complete to the knee : the veins were welling with blood, but none spurted out : and as I watched with fascinated eyes I saw the cut surface gradually rise like water in a lock. It was the most uncanny thing. I pressed my hand upon it, only to feel it lifted by a gentle, even pressure as the Professor's femur extended itself : and I remember noticing that though my thumb had stoppered a brimming artery, not a drop of blood stained it.

After that I think I must have fainted, as folk will, simply from excess of the unusual : for the next thing I remember is the Professor—the whole of him—standing over me and talking excitedly. I looked up in a dazed and bewildered fashion : he was waving his arms about, and crying that he had Found the Way : then suddenly he thrust his hand as it were through a hole in space ; for it vanished completely : he deliberately plunged his arm up to the elbow in—nothing ; and drew it out again.

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“ But it’s so easy,” he kept on repeating ; “ easy as winking. Why didn’t I ever think of it before ? ”

“ Think of what ? ” I asked desperately.

“ The Fourth Dimension,” he answered. (Now I ought to mention that we were together writing a book on “ Multi-dimensional Perspective.”) “ Here have we been fooling around after Imaginary Roots, and Functions, trying to mop up the mess Einstein has made, when all the time the Fourth Dimension was no different in kind from the other three that we are familiar with.”

“ But I don’t see——” I began.

“ No, of course you don’t ! ” he barked, and settled into the full stride of his lecture-room manner.

“ My assumption is that the Fourth Dimension is just another dimension : no more different in kind from length, say, than length is from breadth and thickness : but perpendicular to all three. Now suppose that a being in two dimensions—a flat creature, like the moving shadows of a cinematograph—were suddenly to grasp the concept of the Third Dimension, and so step out of the picture. He might only move an inch, but he would vanish completely from the sight of the rest of his world.”

“ But the sections,” I interrupted ; “ why

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should I see you in those horrible sections ? ”

The Professor raised his hand.

“ I am coming to that,” he said.

“ Then suppose that instead of returning all at once—smack, flat, which would be difficult unless he had a vacuum prepared to receive him—he inserted his feet first, and so gradually slid back into the Universe. It is evident that his fellow-creatures, during the process, would see him in ever-changing sections, until he was once more completely back in their space. Now I worked this much out last night in bed : and all the morning I have been cudgelling my brains to grasp in which direction it could lie, this dimension at right angles to length, breadth, and thickness. But all of a sudden——”

I could contain myself no longer.

“ This is wonderful ! ” I cried. “ This is power ! Think of it ! A step, and you are invisible ! No prison cells can hold you, for there is a side to you on which they are as open as a wedding-ring ! No safe is secure from you : you can put your hand *round the corner*, and draw out what you like. And, of course, if you looked back on the Universe you had left, you would see us in sections, open to you ! You could place a stone or a tablet of poison right in the very bowels of your enemies ! ”

He passed his hand across his forehead.

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“Heavens!” he cried. “Could I really do all that?”

“Of course you could,” I answered excitedly. “There is nothing you couldn’t do. Only make haste to explain to me which this new direction is, and we’ll hold the world in fee!”

“It’s . . . it’s . . .”—he flapped his hands helplessly. “How can I explain?” he said. “It’s just the *other* direction. It’s *there*!” he cried suddenly, trying to point, with the result that his forefinger and half his hand vanished from view.

“Hold my hand,” he suggested, “and I’ll try to pull you out.”

I took his hand, and he gradually slid feet first out of sight, till soon there was nothing of him left but a pulsing hand that tugged at my arm. And then Catastrophe fell on us. Just what happened I shall never know; whether it was through tugging against my resistance, or whether he was too excited to notice what he was doing, or whether he simply wished to address some remark to me; but the unhappy man thrust his head back into space: and instead of thrusting it into vacancy, he thrust it into that exact spot occupied by a heavy writing-table. Now there is an axiom that two objects cannot occupy the same point in space at the same time: and the result of disobeying it was

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hideous. There was a terrific splintering of wood, almost an explosion ; at the same time his hand closed its grip right through my arm, vanishing from view. The whole room was littered with splinters and dust, mixed almost into a mash with blood and brains. . . .

But his body was never found ; and for all I know it is still floating just outside our space, perhaps only a few inches from the armchair where it was used to smoke and read and theorize.