

—Jack Finney

Introduction

Charley is a young man of 31. He had several times lost himself in the Grand Central Station. He bumps into new doorways and new corridors. He even finds himself in a long tunnel that leads him to a place he never wanted to go. His psychiatrist friend believes that he has been day-dreaming to escape from the unhappiness of his present life. But Charley does not believe so. He has been to the third level where he can find means to escape into the past. He, however, is never again able to find the third level. He tells his psychiatrist friend Sam about a peaceful small town named Galesburg. The psychiatrist is infected by Charley's dream. He himself escapes into it. The story is a mixture of reality and fantasy. Logically, no one can travel back into time, except in one's imagination. But Sam as well as Charley have experienced it. Charley even finds a letter with a postmark dated July 18, 1894 written by Sam after he has been there for two weeks, it is hard to believe it as true.

Summary

Charley was 31 years old man married to Louisa. Several times he had lost himself in the Grand Central Station. He always found himself bumping into new doorways and new corridors. Every time he had a new experience. He even had begun to believe that the Grand Central was like a huge tree ever pushing new tunnels and new corridors like the roots under the ground. Once he got into a mile long tunnel and came out in the lobby of a hotel. At another time, he came up into the building of an office.

There were certainly only two levels at the Grand Central. But Charley asserted that there were three levels. He talked about it to his friends. One of them was a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist said that it was nothing but day-dreaming. He explained that it was only an escape from his present life. The modern world was full of fear, tension and worries. The third level provided him an exit from it.

His other friends agreed with the psychiatrist. They said that his stamp collecting was also a temporary escape.

Charley did not agree with them. He said that his grandfather started the stamp collection. And in his grandfather's days, life was peaceful. He did not need an escape. Besides, President Roosevelt also collected stamps.

One day, Charley got late from his office. He wanted to reach home soon. So he went to the Grand Central to catch a train. He walked down to the first level, and then walked down another flight of stairs. He thought he had reached the second level again. But he got lost. He walked down a corridor. He thought it was wrong. But he walked on downward. He walked down a short flight of stairs. He thought that he had reached the second level again. But actually he had reached the third level.

The third level was entirely different and old-fashioned. There were fewer ticket windows. The information booth was made of wood. The lights were open flame gas lights. There were brass spittoons on the floor. Men had beards and sideburns. Women wore old-fashioned dresses and high buttoned shoes. The railway engine was small with a funnel shaped stack. Everything looked a century old. He walked to the newsboy. There he glanced at "The World". The lead story was about President Cleveland. Later Charley found out from the library files that it was printed on June 11, 1894.

Charley wanted to go to Galesburg. He had been there in his childhood days. It was a wonderful town with tremendous tress and frame houses. In 1894, it was a heaven of peace and tranquility. People lived a carefree life. So he asked for two tickets to Galesburg. He paid the fare in modern notes which were different from those in 1894. The clerk thought the notes were fake and Charley was trying to cheat him. He threatened to get him arrested. Charley immediately turned around and fled as fast as he could.

Next day, Charley bought old-style notes from a coin dealer. He got only two hundred old dollars for three hundred new dollars. But he could never again find the corridor that led to the third level.

Charley's wife was worried when she heard that he had bought old-style notes. So, Charley turned to his stamp collection. One day, among his grandfather's collection of first day covers, he discovered an envelope. The postmark

showed that it had been there since July 18, 1894. He opened the envelope but the paper inside was not blank. It was a letter from Sam, the psychiatrist friend whom Charley had often told about Galesburg. He had already gone there. He urged Charley to continue to look for the third level and join him in the Galesburg of 1894. It was a wonderful place.

Later Charley learnt that Sam had bought eight hundred dollars' worth of old currency. Charley hoped Sam would have set up hay and feed business in Galesburg. And that was what he had always wished to do.

Short Answer Type Questions

(3 marks each)

(Answer the following questions in about 30-40 words each)

Q.1. What does the third level refer to?

Ans. The third level refers to the imaginary third underground level of the Grand Central Railway Station. 2

Q.2. Would Charley ever go back to the ticket counter on the third level to buy tickets to Galesburg for himself and his wife?

Ans. No, Charley would never be able to reach the third level again. 2

Q.3. Do you think that the third level was a medium of escape for Charley? Why?

Ans. Yes, I think the third level was a medium of escape for Charley. He had a strange day-dream wish to escape from his present worries. He wanted to escape into the past. He believed that in the old days, life was peaceful. People in his grandfather's time lived a carefree life. All those charms were lost. The present day world is full of worries, wars, tension and haste. Charley was always lost in his own thoughts. He was unaware of his surroundings. One day he found himself in the lobby of the Roosevelt Hotel and some other time he came up in an office building. Another day, he reached the third level. 2

Q.4. What do you infer from Sam's letter to Charley?

Ans. Sam was a psychiatrist. But he too had his dreams. The description of Galesburg given by Charley infected him. He too wanted to escape from the present world. He did not like to pursue his present profession. He wanted to live in a small

town like Galesburg. He wanted to settle as hay, feed and grain businessman. So, he also discovered the 'third level' to escape.

The letter he wrote to Charley bore the postmark of July 18, 1894. Probably, it was a first day cover sent to Charley's grandfather by somebody. But strangely, the letter was addressed to Charley by Sam. It meant that Sam had really escaped into the past. He had crossed the boundaries of time and space to reach the Galesburg of 1894. Or else, it was Charley who was day-dreaming. 2

Q.5. What did the psychiatrist think when Charley told him about the third level?

Ans. There were only two levels at the Grand Central Station. When Charley told the psychiatrist that he had been to the third level, he believed that Charley was day-dreaming. He was trying to escape from the worries and tensions of the present day world. 2

Q.6. 'The modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and stress.' What are the ways in which we attempt to overcome them?

Ans. The past has always been alluring. Man always believes that the past was pleasant, without haste and worries. People lived carefree lives. So, we try to escape from the present realities to the imaginary past. We do so in different ways. But it is our imagination that plays the major role. We write or read charming stories about the past. Sometimes we read stories of love and adventure. Some people pursue some hobbies like music, stamp collecting, painting, or reading religious scriptures. 2

Long Answer Type Questions

(6 marks each)

(Answer the following questions in about 125-150 words each)

Q.1. Do you see an intersection of time and space in the story?

Ans. Imagination of people like H. G. Wells ran riot. He believed that it was possible to travel in time as we can travel in space. He thought that a machine could be invented that could carry us back into the past or the future. If we went into the past, we would find the place different from what it looks like today. Sam, for example, traveled to Galesburg which was not like as it is today but as it was in 1890s. Similarly, when Charley reached the third level, everything was as it was in 1894. The ticket booth, the men there, people with sideburns, women dressed in old-fashioned garments, the

naked flames and even the currency notes were of 1894. There is indeed an intersection of time and space. 6

Q.2. Apparent illogicality sometimes turns out to be a futuristic projection. Discuss.

Ans. Man is endowed with the gift of imagination. He is a dreamer. Every great invention was an illogical dream to begin with. Icarus and his father flew with the help of artificial wings attached to themselves. How illogical! They could not have flown like that. Even to think of flying like birds was a sheer dream. But today we can fly at great speed. The aeroplane of today is a dreamer's idea of the flying carpet or uran khatola of past imagination. But those illogical things are the realities of today. 6

Q.3. Philately helps in keeping the past alive. Discuss other ways in which this is done. What do you think of human tendency to constantly move between the past, the present and the future?

Ans. Man has always been interested in the past. He looks back and is eager to know how life was like in old times. Not only the past of mankind, but even the distant past of the earth is alluring. Scientists spend fortunes and precious years of their lives to look for fossils to reconstruct the conditions under which those extinct animals lived. Pyramids are ransacked to learn about pharaohs and their times. We preserve ancient monuments to keep the past alive. Our history books tell us about lost civilisations. Coins, pottery, artifacts, statues, temples and other things tell us about the past. These are preserved and displayed in museums. Man is seldom satisfied with the present. So, he looks 'before and after'. 6

Q.4. Compare the interweaving of fantasy and reality in the stories The Third Level and The Adventure.

Ans. Narlikar in his story 'The Adventure' presumes that a number of worlds exist side by side. Professor Gaitonde accidentally bumps into an India which is not like the India he knew. He does not even go into the past. It was an India that existed side by side the present one. But the history had taken two entirely different routes. Narlikar says that it is not a presumption. It is not what would have happened if the Marathas had won the battle of Panipat. But actually, scientifically, it is possible for a number of worlds to exist simultaneously. But, 'The Third Level' is a journey into the past. It is

like H.G. Well's idea of time machine. It does not believe in the existence of different worlds, but the different fourth dimension. Suppose we went into the days of Ashoka, we should find the places as they existed at that time.

Such things may be possible to discover someday. The stories are improbable. They interweave fantasy and reality. 6

Q.5. Why did Charley think that Grand Central Station was growing like a tree, pushing out new corridors and staircases like roots?

Ans. The Grand Central Station of the New York is huge. It has two levels. Charley had been into the Grand Central hundreds of times. Every time he had a new experience. He would bump into new corridors and new staircases. He had lost his way there many times. Once he got into a tunnel a mile long and came up in the lobby of a hotel. Another time he came up in an office building. So he had begun to suspect that the Grand Central was ever pushing up new corridors and new staircases like roots of a tree. Perhaps new corridors and tunnels were trying to reach Times Square and Central Park. But his most amazing experience was when he lost his way and reached the third level. He was in a hurry to reach home one evening. He wanted to take a train on the second level. But the corridor led him to the third level which was not supposed to exist. The strangest thing was that the corridor had led him into the past. Everything, including people, on third level, was about a century old. It was that of 1894. 6

