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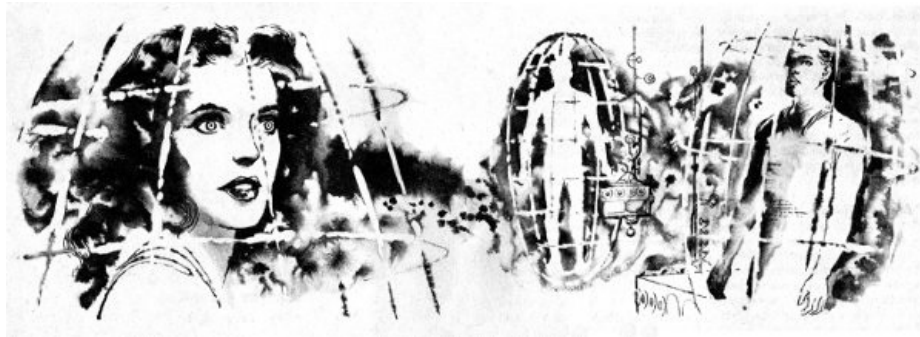
## In the Cards

By ALAN COGAN

Illustrated by ESMH

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The first thing I did when I bought my Grundy Projector was take a trip to about two years ahead and see what was going to happen to me. Everyone was doing it around that time; students were taking short trips into the future to learn whether or not they would pass their exams, married couples were looking ahead to see how many kids they were going to have, businessmen were going into the future to size up their prospects.

It is one thing to safeguard the future ... and something else entirely to see someone you love cry in terror two years from now!

I took the trip because I was getting married and I couldn't resist the temptation of finding out how things would work out with my fiancée Marge and myself. Not that I had any doubts about Marge, but the Grundy Projectors were guaranteed harmless and there's no point in taking chances with a serious step like marriage.

Everybody was looking ahead then. Within a week after the Grundy Projectors were introduced, you could walk past homes every evening and see people with those shimmering bird-cages around them. Their bodies were there, but heaven knows when their minds were—months and often even years ahead of time.

I knew exactly when to go on my first time trip. I even knew where: I'd already put a down payment on a home in the new dome housing area where Marge and I would be living after the wedding. Knowing where to go on a time trip is important. On this one, for instance, I hadn't been assigned an address yet and there were all sorts of changes in the place—buildings and streets where there had only been empty lots and sections marked off by string—and I just had to hunt until I came to our home.

You can imagine how much more difficult finding my future self would be if I hadn't known the exact location. That's about the only major drawback to making time trips and I don't see how it can be overcome. Directories would be one answer, but how would you go about putting them together if your crews can't ask questions or touch filing cards or even open future visiphone books?

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Eventually, after setting the dial around the two-year mark, which is about the maximum limit on most models, I found myself in my future home in the dome housing area. I was watching myself as I would be and Marge as she would be. Only I didn't like what I saw.

We were fighting and screaming at each other. You could tell at a glance that we hated each other. And after only two years!

I was completely stunned as I watched that scene. Future Marge looked furious; she had the kind of look I never even suspected she could get on her face. But I think I was more enraged at my future self than at her. At the time, I was seriously in love with Marge—although it seemed evident it wasn't going to last—and I loathed myself for acting that way toward her. And after all those rash promises I had been making, too!

I was really a tangled mess of emotions as I watched our future selves battling it out.

I became conscious of not being alone as I watched. It didn't take long to discover that it was Marge who had come to join me. I should have expected her—she must have been just as curious about her marriage as I was and, like myself, would naturally take her Projector to the two-year limit. Of course we couldn't hold hands the way we would have if our bodies had been there, but then we probably wouldn't have held them long. We were both pretty embarrassed by what we saw.

The cause of the fight was very obscure, and though we saw and heard everything perfectly, we still didn't really understand. However, the emotions expressed were plain enough.

"You aren't going to die, Marge," my future self was yelling at her. "Try and get that through your damned thick stupid skull!"

"I am! I am!" she was screaming back at me. "You know I'm going to die. You want to get rid of me. Our marriage has been one long fight from the start."

"Don't talk such damned rot," my future self hollered back at her. "There's probably a perfectly good explanation for it all and you're too ignorant to see it!"

"The only explanation is that I'm going to die," future Marge insisted. She broke down, sobbing into an already saturated handkerchief.

My future self stamped around the room, cursing and furiously kicking the furniture. "Why don't you find out for sure? Why don't you go in closer and find out the real reason?"

She sobbed even louder. "I daren't! You do it for me. Go find out for yourself and then tell me."

That seemed to make my future self even madder. "You know I wouldn't touch one of those things even to save my life. I mean it, too! Besides, if you do die, it'll be your own fault. You'll have *believed* yourself to death! You think you're going to die and now you won't be happy until you *are* dead."

Future Marge began to sob hysterically and *my* Marge, who had been right beside me, suddenly seemed to grow a little more remote.

Then a strange thing happened. My future self stopped pacing up and down the room and turned to look straight at me with the queerest expression on his face. That was enough for me. I got out of there fast and flipped back to the peace and security of 2017.

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I climbed out of my Grundy Projector, glad to be back in the relative calm of my body, although it still took me a long time to get settled down. I felt like smashing the Projector there and then, and I guess I should have done it.

The problem that had me all tied in knots was whether or not I should go ahead and marry Marge after what I had seen. I know it looked as though I was going to marry her anyway, but in my innocence I figured I could beat that.

I soon realized I was going to get nowhere sitting all by myself in my room, so I went over to Marge's place. She was waiting for me, swinging quietly to and fro on the hammock on the dark patio. Normally I would have sat right down beside her, but this time I just stood back sheepishly and waited.

Neither of us said anything for a while and I just watched as the hammock floated in the faint bluish light from some nearby lamps. Marge seemed to shine almost angelically as the glow caught her dark eyes and her softly tanned arms and legs.

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I could have whipped myself for treating her the way I had seen myself treating her in the future. It must have been a mistake. There had to be a mistake somewhere. I couldn't have made myself do anything to hurt her.

Her voice was husky and scared when she spoke. "Do you think it'll happen the way we saw it, Gerry?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "They say that whatever you see always turns out to be the thing that happens."

"Do you think we'll fight like that when—if we're married?"

It was on the end of my tongue to talk common sense and logic to her, but then I realized that neither of us wanted to hear anything like that. We were in love and we didn't want to hear anything that conflicted with our emotions.

Marge sat up in the hammock and made room for me to sit down beside her.

"I just don't see how it could happen to us," I said. "I don't see how we could fight like that. There must have been some mistake. Maybe we looked in on the wrong people."

Neither of us added anything to that. We both knew we weren't going to change so much that we couldn't recognize ourselves two years later.

"Maybe it was some sort of alternative world we saw," I suggested, eagerly clutching at any straw, "showing us what *could* happen if we didn't work hard at our marriage. It could have been a sort of warning of what could happen to some people. But not us, of course!"

Marge's lonely little hand crept into mine for comfort and I began to warm up to the subject.

"Don't you worry about it," I assured her. "What would we ever find to quarrel about?"

The idea seemed so preposterous, we both began to laugh.

"I couldn't fight with you, Gerry," Marge said, snuggling closer.

"Me, neither," I said. "Don't worry about what we saw. The scientific boys will probably have a rational explanation worked out for the whole thing. I'll bet it's happened to lots of people."

Somehow, while we were talking, we had managed to get very close together in the hammock. Marge and I could never talk far apart for long.

"I couldn't wait for you to come over," Marge said in a small voice.

"I couldn't wait to get here," I lied. "I just don't believe that what we saw could possibly happen to us. What on Earth would we ever find to fight over?"

That was the one basic mistake that we, and everyone else, made when we discussed the Bilbo Grundy Projector. When the Projector showed you something was going to happen, it happened.

That night, Marge and I made plans to get married even sooner and the ceremony took place four weeks later.

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Grundy's Projector had been a well-kept secret until it suddenly burst upon us with a carefully planned publicity campaign. There hadn't even been a hint of experiments in the time-travel field until the discovery had suddenly been made public in the newspapers and on the TV screens of the whole world.

Grundy had discovered a way of projecting a person's view into the future and the equipment required turned out to be amazingly compact, simple and inexpensive. The average cost of a Projector was fifty-five dollars—well within practically anyone's price range.

Grundy and his backers had lined up a large number of famous people beforehand, all of whom had tried the Projector and were only too willing to tell us how great it was. Terrific fun—the newest thrill since the first radio, or the first airplane, or the first space rocket. And absolutely harmless, too!

All you had to do was set a dial and get into the cage and you could watch yourself an hour or a day or up to two years ahead of time. If you wanted to see if it was going to rain that weekend, all you did was climb in and take a look. If you wanted to see where you would be going for your annual vacation, just press a button and you would see yourself making the final plans. All for fifty-five dollars. What with all the advertising coming at us via every possible medium, Grundy sold a million in the first five days.

Because he knew exactly how many he was going to sell—just by making use of his own invention—Grundy was fully prepared for the onslaught of customers.

Everyone talked of nothing but the new sensation. You couldn't go anywhere without hearing about it. It seemed as if the rest of the world had stopped.

Before long, there wasn't a thing about the next two years that we didn't know. We all jumped ahead in great leaps and found out all kinds of things that were due to happen to us and to the world. If the things were good, we waited happily for them to happen. If things didn't look too good, we shrugged it off, like Marge and me, and said it couldn't happen to us.

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But that was the catch. Whatever we saw happening did take place exactly as we saw it—it was inescapable. The first instance I saw of this was in the accounting office where I operated an accounts analyzer. We advertised for a new operator to assist in my department and lined up interviews with thirty-two applicants. When the day of the interviews arrived, only one applicant turned up. He was found suitable and got the job.

The president, Mr. Atkins, was pretty het up about the whole affair. "Why would thirty-one men not present themselves for interviews as they had arranged?" he kept asking me. "It's a good job, isn't it, Gerald?"

I tried to explain to him that the Time Projector was probably involved in the affair, although I couldn't see *how* exactly. Mr. Atkins was an old man who didn't believe in new gadgets of any kind and he wasn't convinced. Finally, however, I managed to get him to call some of the applicants and ask them why they had not appeared for their interviews.

He almost went apoplectic when he heard the reasons. Each of the thirty-one answered that he had flipped ahead to see what was going to happen on that particular day and each one had seen that he *wasn't* going to visit Mr. Atkins in search of a job, so he didn't go. Some of them even told him that they knew they were going to get jobs elsewhere on a certain date and that they were just taking a vacation until that day came.

I had a hard time soothing Mr. Atkins that afternoon. He wouldn't stop talking about it. Finally, just to satisfy himself, he re-interviewed the sole successful applicant. As we should have expected, the new man answered that he had looked ahead to see that he was going to get the job and had dutifully made his appearance.

Mr. Atkins was flabbergasted and he spluttered and fumed for minutes on end. Then he looked crafty. "What am I going to do now?" he asked the new man.

"You're going out to get drunk, sir," the new man answered.

And that's exactly what Mr. Atkins did.

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Crazy situations like that became commonplace in no time. The newspapers were filled with them every day, though it still took us quite a while to understand that there was nothing we could do to avoid the inevitable. It was all pretty staggering and naturally we protested like madmen. Naturally it didn't do a bit of good. It was in the cards that we would protest without results.

Even when we did get quieted down, we were still in a daze because of the weird things that were happening. For instance, there was this fellow on our street who suddenly became famous for writing a best-selling novel.

For ten years, he had been writing without selling a word and then suddenly he broke into the big time with a best-seller. Everyone asked him how he had done it and he calmly explained that he looked into the future and saw himself with a popular novel to his credit. He found out what the novel was about and then came back to his own time and wrote it and his success worked out exactly as he had seen it on his time trip. No one could say that he hadn't written the book himself.

My kid brother Willy was in first year medicine when he looked ahead and saw that he wasn't going to be present at the term-end exams, so he just didn't bother to attend. He stayed in bed that day. He didn't want to be a doctor, anyway—I think he only started it for my mother's sake. A lot of people argued with him and said if he had only gotten out of bed that morning and gone to school, the prediction would have been proven false.

The only answer to that, of course, is that Willy just *didn't* get out of bed that morning, thus proving the prediction *true*.

We argued for weeks over that one. It doesn't matter now—Willy is a 'copter mechanic and crazy about the work. After all, he didn't have the slightest difficulty getting a job. He simply looked ahead to see where he would be working and then applied.

Inevitably, some people found out when they were going to die. Even when they took steps to forestall the grim event, they often discovered that their plans actually helped them arrive at their demise right on the button. But most people died of old age anyway, what with all the latest developments in safety engineering and medicine.

Nevertheless, it meant that fate was having its own way as usual, with the difference that we knew everything beforehand and remained just as helpless!

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Once we all realized for sure that the predictions were one hundred per cent accurate, all kinds of changes affected our lives.

For a start, a lot of people automatically found their jobs had disappeared overnight—weather forecasters, news analysts, pollsters, stock-market speculators, and all the people connected with any form of racing, betting, lotteries or raffles, to name only a few. Gambling, respectable or otherwise, requires someone to win and someone to lose—and who'd be willing to lose on a result he already knew?

A few new jobs were created by others who looked ahead and foresaw such things as earthquakes, fires, floods, volcanic eruptions and violent storms. They set up special teams for handling these disasters, evacuating people and removing valuable property beforehand.

This explained why, as we looked ahead, we saw fewer and fewer deaths occurring from these tragedies. The growing efficiency of the rescue services worked wonders—which were part of the future, as you'd expect, not successful attempts to change it—although there were always a small number of deaths, mainly the kind of people who never used to pay any attention to the news, didn't look at road signs, and the like.

Some of them belonged to the crowd who opposed Bilbo Grundy's fabulous invention. They were strictly a minority but, as is usually the case, they were a pretty noisy and outspoken bunch. They were a mixed lot, too, made up of people who had foreseen their deaths or personal disaster, those who had lost their jobs through the invention, a number of cranks who habitually were against everything, plus a few, like myself, who just didn't feel easy about the Projector.

I couldn't see that time travel was evil or sinful the way some of them described it and I never attended any of their protest meetings, but I did sympathize with them to a certain extent. Everyone called them the 'Diehards' and the stock remark was that they should look into the future to see if their movement was going to be a success before they got too involved in it.

That drove them wild.

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Marge spent a lot of time with her Projector. The device was very popular with women, mainly, I guess, because it was the absolutely perfect fortune-telling device and it was much more fun than either video or visiphone conversations.

I put my own Grundy Projector away in the basement shortly after I got married and I never used it any more. To my way of thinking, it made life pretty dull. I had just been married and I was also starting to get ahead at my job—Mr. Atkins had put me in charge of a whole department full of accounts analyzers. I went around with all sorts of wild plans and dreams of a rosy future for us. I hoped someday to form my own company and I was also interested in finding a better place to live. The dome housing development was only temporary as far as I was concerned and I wanted something bigger for when we could afford a family.

I suppose we all have those dreams of success when we're young, and though most of us have fairly predictable futures, I still can't help thinking that it's those wild dreams and schemes that keep us slugging away and add a little zest to life. Anyway, I soon found that Marge was knocking all the zest out of my life because she *knew* the future for both of us and she kept telling me about it.

It took me a few weeks to finally persuade her that I'd rather not know what was going to happen. But it was too late then, because she'd told me everything that was important.

For instance, I knew I was going to be living in the dome house for another two years and probably more. I knew I was still going to be working for Mr. Atkins and I knew just how much money I was going to have in the bank at the end of two years. I even knew that my paunch would get bigger and my hair would start falling out.

Life got to be just a matter of sitting around waiting for the expected to happen.

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I tried hard to break Marge of the time projection habit, but it was useless. She was as addicted as everyone else and the Grundy Projector looked as though it was going to be here for good and no one was going to stop it.

After all, who could prevent an expectant mother from jumping ahead a year or so to find out whether she is going to have a boy or girl? I know the doctors can tell with one hundred per cent accuracy in the second month, but the parents-to-be still want to find out if Junior will look like Mom or Dad.

Or who could prevent a young boy and girl from finding out whom they were going to marry? New methods of courting appeared—if you could call it courting. A boy would merely look ahead and find out who the lucky girl was going to be and then call on her. She was usually sitting at the front door waiting for him, too. I kind of liked the old-fashioned way, when Marge and I met by chance one day and then spent months getting to know each other.

Of course it was impossible to avoid knowing future news whether you wanted to hear it or not. The newspapers, in trying to beat each other to scoops, could only find good headline material among the Diehards; the rest of us all knew what would happen to us. Most of the papers carried two separate sections—one for future events and the other for present "news."

We still had crime with us. The crooks who knew they were going to jail always went there at the appointed time, regardless of their elaborate precautions and so-called foolproof systems. Others who knew they were going to stay free for a couple of years at least led fabulously successful lives of crimes, made more daring by the fact that they knew they were temporarily safe from the law. The police, on the other hand, never bothered to chase these characters, knowing in advance that they weren't going to catch them anyway.

This naturally set the Diehards to hollering. For a time, they talked of forming vigilante groups to do their own policing, but nobody worried about this. It was in the cards, you see, that they weren't going to do it.

The final blow to the Diehards came during the Federal Elections of 2017, when the Neo-Republicans just got up and walked out of office and the United North-South Democrats walked in without a single election speech being made. I know a few votes were cast, but everyone knew what the results would be long before it happened.

The part that annoyed the Diehards so much was that it was *their* handful of votes that decided the results.

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Toward the end of the first two years, Marge and I began to have our first samples of that bitter quarrel we had both witnessed on our first time trip. I had almost forgotten about what I had seen, but soon I saw how I was going to be taking part in such quarrels quite frequently.

Marge just wouldn't stop making those time trips and it seemed to me she spent hours every day in her Projector. There was something in the future that worried her and, naturally that worried me, too. I was almost tempted to get my own Projector out of the basement and find out for

myself. Marge was beginning to look sick and pale all the time. She got much thinner and weaker and I knew she cried a lot when I wasn't around.

I tried my best to find the cause of the trouble, but I got nowhere. Trying to cheer her up with little surprises was a waste of time. It's no fun trying to surprise anyone who knows better than yourself what the surprise is going to be.

Finally, when out of desperation I had almost decided to take my first time trip in nearly two years, I came home from the office to find Marge sobbing hysterically beside the Projector.

"We're going to die, Gerry!" she said, when I managed to get her fairly coherent. "I've been looking ahead for months now and I just don't see us *anywhere* in the future!"

So there it was. I didn't know what to do or say. I was scared and mad and sorry for Marge for keeping such a secret bottled up inside herself for so long.

The first thing I said was, "There must be a mistake—" until I remembered that there were *never* any mistakes with Grundy Projectors.

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Nevertheless, I still tried to find a way out of the situation. "Maybe you couldn't find us because we moved," I said quickly. "Maybe I got another job and left town or was transferred to the Boston office. Mr. Atkins has mentioned it a couple of times."

"I looked," Marge said miserably. "I looked everywhere and I just couldn't see us anywhere."

"But how do you know we're going to die?" I argued. "Did you see it happen?"

She shook her head. "I didn't dare look that close. I got it pinned down to somewhere in the next month and I didn't dare look any closer, afraid I might have to see something horrible. All I know is we just won't be around sometime after the next four or five weeks."

"Has anyone mentioned anything to you about our death?" I asked. It was considered improper to even hint at another person's death just in case that person hadn't found out. Still, you know how tactless some people can be.

Marge just shook her head and went right on sobbing.



"Listen," I said, "I'll bet you're getting all worked up for nothing. Anything—absolutely anything—could happen in the next few weeks. There's probably a perfectly simple explanation for the whole thing."

I guess I wasn't very convincing because Marge just stared dumbly at me, tears spilling out of her eyes. "Gerry, would—would you go and look? If it's something harmless, you can come right back and tell me. If it's something awful, I won't ask about it."

"No," I said. "That would be just the same as telling you what's going to happen. Besides, I don't want to know."

We just sat around the house for the rest of that evening. After Marge had gone to bed, I went down to the basement and smashed both our Bilbo Grundy Time Projectors into little pieces. I'd seen the hopelessness and despair in people who had learned just how and when they would die. Smashing the things wouldn't change the future—I realized that—

but I didn't want Marge obeying the impulse to find out. Or myself, for that matter.

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Shortly after that, the quarreling started in earnest. Marge wouldn't let up on the business of dying, and as well as being scared, I was also sick of hearing about our short and questionable future. Marge was furious with me for destroying her Projector and blamed me constantly for making her suffer by preventing her from looking into the future.

"Now we won't know what's going to happen until it's too late!" she shrieked at me.

"That's right!" I yelled back. "And that's just the way I want it! What's the use of knowing and worrying in advance if there's no way of doing anything about it?"

Then, one night, we had the identical fight that we had watched two years earlier, on our first time trip. Marge, as usual, was crying hysterically about not having long to live and I was shouting at her about wishing herself into the grave. She seemed to have forgotten that I was going to go, too, and had taken all the suffering on her own shoulders.

When I was hollering and stamping about the room, I had a funny, eerie feeling as I suddenly remembered that my younger unmarried self had watched—or was watching—the same scene.

I just stopped doing anything for a moment and stared around the room. Naturally I saw nothing, because there was nothing to see, and I remembered how quickly my younger self had fled when I had looked up like that. Ashamed, I tried to soothe Marge, but she was too far gone to be comforted.

I was glad to get out of the house every day and spend a few hours at the office. I must admit that I was scared to be with Marge because it looked as though we were going to go together and I felt safer away from her. I know it's nothing to be proud of, but it helped ease the tension, for Marge as well as myself.

One day, Mr. Atkins stopped in at my office and sat down to talk. There was nothing unusual about this; he often visited me for a chat, even though he wasn't so friendly with the other employees.

We talked for a while about the usual things, department business and some of the staff members.

Then Mr. Atkins turned the conversation away from business matters. "Do you have one of those newfangled Time Projector things, Gerald?" he asked. Mr. Atkins was getting on in years and called everything introduced in the last thirty years "newfangled."

"No," I said. "I did have one, but I stopped using it soon after I got it."

"Didn't you like it?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't that. I just preferred to find out for myself what would happen to me." I didn't want to tell him the true story or my other troubles.

Mr. Atkins sat back in his chair and sighed. "Ah, yes. I don't suppose you remember too much about the old days, not after the last two years we've been through. People had problems in those days and they used to have to solve them for themselves. People don't have to make decisions any more, you know. Do you think you could still make a decision, Gerald?"

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I got a little excited and found it difficult to stop fidgeting and stay quietly seated. I began to suspect that he was leading up to something important. It could have been the transfer to another branch or an out-of-town assignment which would explain our disappearance in the future.

"I still try to make plans and direct my own future whenever I can," I stalled.

"It's difficult, I know," Mr. Atkins went on, "especially when all the news is about something that's going to happen a day or a week or a year from now. It's not so bad for an old man like me, but it must be tough on you young fellows. Too bad this Bilbo—uh—"

"Grundy," I said. "Bilbo Grundy." Mr. Atkins knew the name as well as I did, but it was one of his little tricks to pretend he was getting old and forgetful, although he really wasn't. It used to be a good business tactic before the Grundy Projector came out. It wasn't any more—not with people being able to see outcomes of dealings—but he couldn't get rid of the habit.

"It's too bad he had to invent that fool time gadget," he went on. "I suppose your wife uses it all the time. They seem to be very popular with women."

"Marge gave it up a short time ago," I lied. "She got bored with it."

Mr. Atkins nodded thoughtfully. "Wouldn't it be nice to live in an age again when none of us knew what was going to happen? When life had lots of surprises—both good and bad? When you could get up in the morning and not be sure what was going to happen before night? Would you like that, Gerald?"

I didn't know what to say. He was off on that wandering-mind routine and I didn't know for sure whether he was really rambling or not.

"I think I'd like it, Mr. Atkins," I said. "As long as everyone else was in the same boat."

"*Would* you like it?" He was suddenly looking at me with the shrewd, out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye expression he had when he was handling some wealthy client's intricate income tax problems.

"I mean it," I told him. "I'm tired of living among people who know my business two years ahead of time."

"I can get you to a world like that," he said quietly.

I didn't say anything in reply. Who could?

"I have some friends," he went on, "who make a practice of helping people like yourself to better things."

"What do you mean by 'better things'?" I asked warily.



"I'm talking about time travel, Gerald. The real thing—not the Bilbo Grundy toy, but real physical time travel. These friends have gone a lot further than Grundy did with his invention and they perform the service of transporting people to a better age."

"You mean the future?"

"The past!" said Mr. Atkins. "The chances are the future will be even worse. I'm talking about the middle of the last century, around the nineteen-fifties or thereabouts."

I began to laugh. "The nineteen-fifties! What would I do to earn a living in those days?"

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He gave me a thin smile. "I guess that would be your first unsolved problem. After all, you said you wanted problems and the chance to make plans and try to make them come true."

"But why pick me?" I wanted to know.

"I like you, Gerald," he said. "I would like to see you have a decent chance. And don't flatter yourself—you wouldn't be the first one to go. You'd be in good company."

I just sat staring vacantly at him.

"I guess you could say this is your first big decision in two years," he added. "There's no hurry. You can think it over for a while."

I asked questions—lots of them—but I didn't get too many answers. Mr. Atkins explained that naturally the affair was hush-hush. After the way the Grundy Projector had been thrust so irresponsibly upon us, no one wanted any further complications. But there were some answers I could piece together both from what I already knew and the hints he dropped.

I'd been in on conferences and listened to Mr. Atkins try to figure out ways of expanding, building up our business. Each time, he'd been stymied by the Grundy Projector. If he'd bull some idea through, his competitors would see exactly how it worked out. If he didn't, they'd know that, too. And I had heard him rant when the accountants—using the Grundy Projectors, of course—would make up their inventory, sales, profit-and-loss and tax statements two years or more in advance.

That was actually what galled him. Mr. Atkins was used to making plans, calculating risks and gains, taking his chances. With the Grundy Projectors in existence, nobody could do that any more. I gathered from what he told me that there was a syndicate of men like himself backing the inventor of a genuine time machine. They didn't condemn the Grundy invention on any moral or religious or even selfish grounds. They just resented very bitterly the same thing that annoyed me—the sense of repetition.

As Mr. Atkins put it, "It's no different than reading a story and then having to relive the whole thing, anticipating each action and bit of dialogue. And that's precisely what this is. Only it's our lives, not fiction. We didn't like it, Gerald. We didn't like it at all! But we did something about the problem instead of merely complaining."

Let me say right now that I thought the solution they came up with was nonsensical and I kept searching, all the time we talked, for ways of politely turning down the offer. Escaping to the past was a ridiculous answer. But it was just the kind of notion that would appeal to an old-fashioned character like Mr. Atkins.

I didn't tell him so, of course. I thanked him for his consideration and shook hands and felt relieved when he finally left.

---

My mind was made up by then. I'd back out, quit if I had to, rather than take refuge in the past to evade the future.

It wasn't until I got out of the office that I realized there was no big decision to make; it was already made for me. Either I was going to die or I was going into the past—and I wasn't going to die if I could help it. But neither did I intend going into the past if I could really help *that!*

When Marge realized that I wasn't merely trying to take her mind off the fatal day, she pounced on me and hugged me as though I myself had invented the time machine just to save her life!

"It's wonderful, darling!" she cried. "You were right all along! Oh, how can you forgive me for making things so unbearable for you?"

"About this idea of going into the past—" I said.

"What's the difference when we go to," she cut in, "as long as we don't have to die?"

"But I figured on telling Mr. Atkins at the last minute that all I want is a transfer—"

"What's the sense of guessing?" she asked excitedly. "All we have to do is borrow a couple of Projectors and see!"

I began to feel myself being squeezed into a one-way trap. I put my foot down—but where it landed was in a Grundy Projector from the people next door—and where it figuratively emerged was eleven days later, when I couldn't shut my non-physical eyes to the way the whole situation would turn out.



Marge and I, with half a dozen others, were getting into a helicar. I followed them out to a house in the country. We handed in all the money we had saved and in return were given old-style clothes, ancient-looking money and a small amount of luggage. Then we all stepped into what looked like an oversized version of a Grundy Projector and vanished.

Fight? Argue? Scheme?

I didn't have a chance.

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It was 1956 when we arrived in old New York. We were met by others who had pioneered the way before us and they looked after our group until we learned the ropes.

There was nothing easy about getting used to the era. I wished often that I could get back to my own time, Grundy Projector or no Grundy Projector. Still, Marge didn't complain; she was prepared to endure anything just because she thought her life had been saved. Occasionally, bothered by my blunders in adjusting to this past century, I'd start to reason with her, explain that her life hadn't been in danger at all. But then, luckily, I would realize that convincing her would leave an angry, dissatisfied wife on my hands and I always managed to stop in time.

I got a job working as a night janitor in a bank and studied accounting in the daytime until I was able to get a steady job. We've been here a few years now and I guess you could say we're pretty well assimilated. We have a house and two small sons and I'm doing well at my job. We still see some of our friends from the 21st century and they've also managed to make the change successfully.

We get together now and then, and talk over old times, and laugh at some things and get nostalgic over other things. Now that there aren't any Grundy Projectors around, we've started feeling once more that our fates are in our own hands.

Rog Owens has an interesting viewpoint. He said one night, "It wasn't the future that was fixed; it was the Grundy Projectors that fixed the future! Whatever people saw would happen, they just let happen ... or even worked to make it happen. No matter what it was, including their own deaths. Hell, how's that any different than voodoo?"

That was pretty much how each of us had felt, only we hadn't figured it out so clearly. But Rog Owens has a special reason for thinking particularly hard about the problem. Mr. Atkins and his syndicate hadn't send us back for purely altruistic reasons; they learned that Rog's daughter Ann would marry a fellow (not one of us) named Jack Grundy and that they'd have a son named Bilbo, who would invent the Grundy Projector. Our assignment was to keep that from happening.

Well, we couldn't prevent the marriage, but we could—and did—make sure their son would have a good, plain American name. It's William Grundy.

But today my younger boy told me their kindergarten teacher calls William "Billy Boy."

And one little girl can't pronounce it. She calls him Bilbo.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE CARDS \*\*\*

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