The Time Traveler

Isaac Asimov

“ACTUALLY, I KNOW SOMEONE MUCH like you,” said George to me as we sat in the lobby of the Café des Modistes, after having consumed a more or less gracious repast.

I was rather enjoying the opportunity to do nothing, in defiance of the deadlines that awaited me at home, and I should have let it go, but I couldn’t. I have a profound appreciation of the uniqueness of my character. "What do you mean?” I said. “There is no one like me.”

"Well,” admitted George, "he doesn’t write as much as you do. No one does. But that’s only because he has *some* regard for the quality of what he writes and is not of the opinion that his lightest typographical error is deathless prose. Still, he *does* write, or rather *did* write, for some years ago, he died and passed on to that special spot in purgatory reserved for writers, in which inspiration strikes continually, but there are no typewriters and no paper.”

“I yield to you in your knowledge of purgatory, George,” I said, stiffly, “since you embody it in your person, but why does this writer-acquaintance of yours remind you of me, aside from simply being a writer?"

“The reason the resemblance burst in upon my inward eye, old friend, is that, while having achieved worldly success and wealth, as you have, he also complained continually and bitterly of being underappreciated. ”

I frowned. “I do *not* complain of being underappreciated.”

"Do you not? I have just spent a tedious lunch listening to you complain at not receiving your full and just deserts, by which, I sus­pect, you do not mean horse-whipping.”

“George, you know very well that I was merely complaining about some of the reviews I have received lately; reviews written by small-minded envious writers-manqué—”

"I have often wondered: What is a writer-manqué?”

"A failed writer or, in other words, a reviewer.”

"There you have it, then. Your comments reminded me of my old friend, now no longer with us, Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb.”

“Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb?” I said, rather stunned.

“Yes. Old Quackbrain, we used to call him.”

“And what did he call you?”

"A variety of names I no longer remember,” said George. “We were friends from youth, because we had gone to the same high school. He had been some years ahead of me, but we met at meet­ings of the alumni association.”

"Really, George? Somehow I had never suspected you of a high­school education.”

“Yes, indeed, we went to Aaron Burr High School, old Quack­brain and 1. Many’s the time he and I sang the old alma mater song together, while tears of nostalgia ran down our cheeks. Ah, golden high-school days!”

And, with his voice rising into a non-musical quaver, he sang:

*“When the Sun shines on our high school,*

*With its golden hue;*

*There, above our loved Old Cesspool,*

*Waves the black and blue. ”*

“Old Cesspool?” I said.

“A term of affection. Yale is known as ‘Old Eli,’ and the Univer­sity of Mississippi is ‘Ol’ Miss’ and Aaron Burr High School—”

“Is Old Cesspool.”

“Exactly.”

“And what is 'black and blue?’”

“Our school colors,” said George, “but I am sure you want to hear the story of Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb.”

“There’s nothing I want to hear less,” I said.

Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb [said George] was, in middle life, a happy man; or, at least, he should have been a happy man, for he was blessed with all anyone could reasonably want.

He had had a long career as a successful writer, turning out books that sold well and were popular and, despite that, books that were spoken of highly by those writers-manqué who call themselves reviewers.

I can see from your face, old man, that you are about to ask me how it is possible for a man to be a successful writer, and to have a name like Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb—and yet remain com­pletely unknown to you. I might answer that this is evidence of your total self-absorption, but I will not, for there is another explanation. Like all writers of even a minimum of sensibility, old Quackbrain used a pseudonym. Like any writer with a modicum of feeling, he didn't want anyone to know how he made his living. I know that you use your own name, but you have no shame!

Quackbrain’s pseudonym, of course, would be well known to you, but he had made me promise, once, to keep it an inviolate secret even after he had passed on to his typewriterless purgatonal­ity and I, of course, must honor that promise.

Yet old Quackbrain was not a happy man.

As a fellow alumnus of dear old Burr, he confided in me. “Of what use is it, George, that money pours in on me in a never-stinting spate? Of what use is it that my fame is worldwide? Of what use is it that I am treated with the utmost consideration by all and sundry.”

“Quackbrain,” I said solemnly, “I believe that there is good use in all this."

“Bah,” he said, “possibly in a worldly sense; possibly in a mere material sense. Yet it leaves the soul untouched.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because,” and here he struck his chest a resounding thump, “the burning memories of youthful snubs and spurmngs remain unavenged and, indeed, forever unavengeable.”

I was thunderstruck. “Surely, you did not receive youthful snubs and spurnings?”

“Did I not? At Old Cesspool itself. At Aaron Burr High School.”

“Bur what happened?” I said, scarcely able to credit my ears.

“It was in 1934,” he said, "I was a junior then and beginning to feel the divine flow of inspiration within me. I knew that someday I would be a great writer and so I signed up for a special writing class that old man Yussif Newberry was giving. Do you remember Yussif Newberry, George?”

“Do you mean Old Snarley Face Newberry?”

"The very same. It was his notion that by calling together such a class, he would have an untapped well of talent from which he could draw written gems that would fill the school’s literary semian­nual magazine. Do you remember the magazine, George?”

I shuddered, and old Quackbrain said, “I see you do. We were assigned to write essays as a preliminary’ measure of our ability and, as I recall, I wrote a paean to spring, breathlessly eloquent, and poetic besides.

"When Snarley Face called on volunteers to read their products, my hand went up proudly at once, and he called me to the head of rhe class. I clutched my manuscript in a hand which, I recall, was perspiring with excitement, and I read my effusion in a ringing voice. I anticipated going through all fifteen pages to gathering excitement in the audience and ending it to the swelling sound of cheers and applause. I anticipated wrongly. Within a page and a half I was interrupted by Newberry’. ‘This,’ he said, enunciating clearly, ‘is the veriest crap, unfit for anything but fertilizer, and only dubi­ously so even for that.’

“Upon this, the class of young sycophants broke into uproari­ous laughter and I was forced to sit down without completing my reading. Nor was that all. Newberry seized every chance thereafter to humiliate me. Nothing that I wrote pleased him. and he made his displeasure disgustingly public, and always to the delight of the class that, in this way, made me its butt.

"At last, as the final task assigned us that term, we were each required to write a story, or a poem or an essay designed to be sub­mitted for publication in the literary semiannual. I wrote a light­hearted essay filled with sparkling wit and humor, and imagine my pleased surprise when Newberry accepted it.

“Naturally, I felt it only just and wise to seek out old Snarley Face after class and congratulate him on his acumen, ‘I am glad, sir,’ I said, ‘that you will have achieved a better product than usual through the use of my essay in the literary semiannual.'

“And he said to me, baring his yellow fangs in a most unpleas­ant manner, ‘I took it, E Q. Flubb, only because it was the only sub­mission that made any attempt whatever, however unsuccessfully, to be funny. Its enforced acceptance, Flubb, is the last straw and I will not give this class again.’

“Nor did he, and, though forty years have passed, the memory of my treatment in that class at Old Cesspool remains green. The scars remain fresh, George, and I can never erase them.”

I said, “But Quackbrain, think of how that old beloved son of an unidentified father must have felt as you rose to literary fame. Indeed, the manner in which you soared to nearly the top of the lit­erary world must have embittered him far more than his old snubs and spurnings could possibly have embittered you.”

“What do you mean, ‘to *nearly* the top’—but never mind. You have clearly not kept up with the later history of the school. The miserable miscreant who gave that class died about five years after I attended it, doing so, it is clear, in an obvious effort to avoid wit­nessing the triumph of the downtrodden, since the lightnings of fame did not begin to flicker about my brow until three years after his death, and so here I am, forever in frustration over the fact that I cannot snap my fingers scornfully under the snub nose of the master snubber. But what would you? Even the gods cannot change the past.”

“I wonder,” I said softly.

“Eh?”

“Nothing. Nothing.”

But, of course, I was thinking of Azazel, my two-centimeter triend from another World, or possibly Universe, or possibly Continuum, whose technological expertise is so far beyond our own as to seem a kind of magic. [Oh, did someone named Clarke say something like that. Well, since I never heard of him, he can be of no importance whatever.]

Azazel was asleep when my calling routine fetched him from his own World, or possibly Universe, or possibly Continuum, and, of course, I won’t give you details of the routine. A coarse mind such as yours would be irretrievably damaged if it tried to encompass the subtleties of the endorcism. I’m only thinking of you, old friend.

I waited patiently for Azazel to wake up, for he is inclined to be a bit testy if aroused, and a testy Azazel is a dangerous Azazel for all his tiny size. So there was nothing to do but to watch his arms and legs move through complicated evolutions I could make noth­ing of. Presumably, he was dreaming something and reacting to the dream.

As the motions became violent, his eyes opened and he sat up with what seemed a start. “I thought so,” he moaned (a high- pitched sibilant moan like a tiny steam whistle), “It was only a dream.”

"What was, O Wonder of the Universe?”

"My assignation with the fair Zibbulk. Will it never become reality? Of course,” he added sadly, “she is something of your size and so she refuses to take me seriously.”

“Can’t you make yourself larger, O Miracle of the Ages?”

“Of course,” he said, with a tiny snarl, “but then my substance becomes thin, smoky and wraithlike and, when I try to embrace her, she feels nothing. I don’t know why it is, but fair females like to feel *something* under such conditions. Still, enough of the poetic out­pourings of my personal tragedy. What do you want this time, you miserable piece of trumpery?”

“Time travel, O Astounder of Astrality.”

"Time travel,” shrieked Azazel. "That is impossible.”

"Is it? I am no physicist, Great One, but scientists on this world speak of faster-than-light travel and of wormholes.”

"They may, for all I care, speak of molasses and of humming­birds, but time travel is theoretically impossible. Forget it.”

“Very well,” I sighed, "but that means that old Quackbrain will spend his last few remaining years unable to avenge the snubs and spurnings he has received from villains in the past, villains who did not perceive, let alone appreciate, his great talents.”

At this Azazel’s face turned from its normal beet-red color to something more approaching the delicate pink of a watermelon’s interior. “Snubs and spurnings?” he said. “Ah, how well I know the spurns that patient merit of th’unworthy takes. You have a friend, then, who suffers as I have suffered.”

“No one,” I said cautiously, “can suffer as your mighty spirit has suffered, O Solace of the Impoverished, but he has suffered somewhat and still suffers.”

“How sad. And he wishes to go hack in time in order to avenge his patient merit on th’unworthy.”

“Exactly, but you said time travel is impossible."

“And so it is. However, I can adust minds. If you have, or can get something that has been in much contact with him, I can so arrange the workings of his mind that it will *seem* to him that he has gone into rhe past and met face to face with his ancient tormenters, and he can then do as he wishes."

“Excellent,” I said. “As it happens, I have here a ten-dollar bill which I borrowed out of his wallet on the occasion of our last meet­ing and I am quite sure that it has been in intimate contact with him for at least a month, for old Quackbrain is anything but a Quick­buck.”

And so it was, for I met Quackbrain about a month later, and he pulled me to one side.

“George,” he said, “last night I had the most amazing dream. At least, I *think* it was a dream, for if it were anything else, I would be going mad. It seemed so *real* it was as though I had stepped back in time. Forty years back.”

“Back in time, eh?”

“That’s what it seemed like, George. It was as though I were a time traveler.”

“Tell me about it. Quackbrain.”

“I dreamed I was back at Old Cesspool. I mean *old* Old Cesspool. Not the way it is today, broken down and lost in the inner city, but as it was forty years ago when it was a respectable antique building, aged only by age. I could walk through the corridors and see the classes, the high schoolers at work. There was the faint aura of Depression. Do you remember the Great Depression, George?”

“Of course I do."

“I read the notices on the bulletin board. I looked over the latest edition of the school paper. No one stopped me. No one noticed me. It was as though I didn’t exist to them, and I realized that I was my present-day self wandering in an earlier tune. And suddenly I further realized that somewhere in the building was Yussif Newberry, still alive. I realized at that moment that I had been brought to Old Cesspool for a purpose. I had a briefcase in my hands and I searched its contents and a great gladness came over me for I had with me all the proofs I needed.

“I pounded up the stairs to the third floor, where his office was to be found. Do you remember his office, George, and the musty smell of stale books that existed within it? That smell was still there after forty years, or, rather, I had gone back forty years and found it where it had always been. I was afraid that Old Snarly Face might be in class, but my dream brought me back at the right time. He was having a free hour and was engaged in marking papers.

"He looked up as I entered. *He* saw me. *He* took notice of me. He was meant to.

“He said, ‘Who are you?’

“I said, ‘Prepare for astonishment, Yussif Newberry, for I am none other than Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb.’

"He frowned. ‘You mean you are the aged father of that grubby nincompoop I had in my class last year?’

“‘No I am *not* the aged father of that grubby nincompoop. Beware, Newberry, for I am that grubby nincompoop himself. I come from forty years in the future to confront you, you cowardly torturer of my youthful self.’

"‘From forty years in the future, eh? I must admit that the pas­sage of time has not improved you. I would have placed the chance of your looking worse than you look now as trifling, but I see you have managed.’

“‘Newberry,’ I thundered, ‘Prepare to suffer. Do you know what I have become in forty years?’

“‘Yes,’ he said calmly, ‘you have become a remarkably ugly man in late middle age. I suppose it was unavoidable but I can almost bring myself to be sorry’ for you.’

“‘I have become more than that, Yussif Newberry. I have become one of the great literary figures of the United States. I have here, for your selection, a copy of my entry in *Who's Who in Amer­ica.* Note the number of my published books and note further, Newberry, that nowhere in these august volumes is the despised name of Yussif Newberry mentioned. I have here, in addition, Yus­sif Newberry, a sampling of reviews of my latest works. Read them and note particularly what it says of my talent and my sterling writing ability. I have here, even more, a profile in the *New Yorker* magazine that makes much of me. And now, Yussif Newberry, think of all the callous and wicked things you said of me and of my writing last year in class, and hang your head in bitter shame, Yus­sif Newberry!’

“‘I suppose,’ said Newberry, 'this is a dream.’

“‘It is probably a dream,’ I said, 'but if so, it is my dream, and what I have here to show you is the truth as it shall be forty years from now. Is not your head bowed in deep contrition, Yussif New­berry?’

“‘No,’ said Newberry, 'I am not responsible for the future. All I can say is that last year in my class everything you wrote was crap and it will stay crap not only forty years from now but to the last syllable of recorded time. Now get out of here and let me mark my papers.’

“And with that, the dream ended. What do you think of it, George?”

“It must have been realistic.”

"Indeed. Indeed. But that’s not what I mean. Can you imagine that teacher-insult to the human condition, upon learning of my greatness, still clinging to his position. No shame. No despair. He still maintained that my juvenilia was crap and moved not one cen­timeter from that position. My heart, George, is broken. It was a far, far worse thing I did than I have ever done. It is a far, far worse rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

He drifted away, old man, a shattered and broken hulk. It was not long afterward that he died.

George ended his story and wiped his eyes with the five-dollar bill I had given him for the purpose. It was not as absorbent as a hand­kerchief would have been, but he insists that he finds the tactile sen­sation of the bill to be superior.

I said, “I suppose it is useless to ask, George, that your stories make sense, but I find I must point out that this was not a true travel in time, according to your own account, but only an imagi­nary one. It was, indeed, a vision induced by Azazel’s manipulation of Flubb’s brain. In that case, Flubb was in control of it, or should have been. Why did he not have Yussif Newberry crawling at his feet in a hopeless plea for forgiveness?”

“That,” said George, “is precisely what I asked Azazel on another occasion. Azazel said that poor Quackbrain, whatever his

prejudice in his own favor, was enough of a literary craftsman to know, at least in his unconscious, that some of his writing *was* crap and that Newberry was correct. Being honest, he had to face that.”

George thought a moment or two and then added, “I suppose he’s not much like you after all.”