The Toynbee Convector, Ray Bradbury

The Toynbee Convector

“Good! great! bravo for me!”

Roger Shumway flung himself into the seat, buckled himself in, revved the rotor and drifted his Dragonfly Super-6 helicopter up to blow away on the summer sky, heading south toward La Jolla.

“How lucky can you get?”

For he was on his way to an incredible meeting.

The time traveler, after a hundred years of silence, had agreed to be interviewed. He was, on this day, 130 years old. And this afternoon, at four o’clock sharp, Pacific time, was the anniversary of his one and only journey in time.

Lord, yes! One hundred years ago, Craig Bennett Stiles had waved, stepped into his Immense Clock, as he called it, and vanished from the present. He was and remained the only man in history to travel in time.

And Shumway was the one and only reporter, after all these years, to be invited in for afternoon tea. And? The possible announcement of a second and final trip through time. The traveler had hinted at such a trip.

“Old man,” said Shumway, “Mr. Craig Bennett Stiles—here I come!” The Dragonfly, obedient to fevers, seized a wind and rode it down the coast.

The old man was there waiting for him on the roof of the Time Lamasery at the rim of the hang gliders’ cliff in La Jolla. The air swarmed with crimson, blue and lemon kites from which young men shouted, while young women called to them from the land’s edge.

Stiles, for all his 130 years, was not old. His face, blinking up at the helicopter, was the bright face of one of those hang-gliding Apollo fools who veered off as the helicopter sank down.
Shumway hovered his craft for a long moment, savoring the delay. Below him was a face that had dreamed architectures, known incredible loves, blueprinted mysteries of seconds, hours, days, then dived in to swim upstream through the centuries. A sunburst face, celebrating its own birthday.

For on a single night, one hundred years ago, Craig Bennett Stiles, freshly returned from time, had reported by Telstar around the world to billions of viewers and told them their future.
“We made it!” he said.

“We did it! The future is ours. We rebuilt the cities, freshened the small towns, cleaned the lakes and rivers, washed the air, saved the dolphins, increased the whales, stopped the wars, tossed solar stations across space to light the world, colonized the moon, moved on to Mars, then Alpha Centauri. We cured cancer and stopped death. We did it—Oh Lord, much thanks—we did it. Oh, future’s bright and beauteous spires, arise!”

He showed them pictures, he brought them samples, he gave them tapes and LP records, film and sound cassettes of his wondrous roundabout flight. The world went mad with joy. It ran to meet and make that future, fling up the cities of promise, save all and share with the beasts of land and sea.

The old man’s welcoming shout came up the wind. Shumway shouted back and let the Dragonfly simmer down in its own summer weather.

Craig Bennett Stiles, 130 years old, strode forward briskly and, incredibly, helped the young reporter out of his craft, for Shumway was suddenly stunned and weak at this encounter.
“I can’t believe I’m here,” said Shumway.

“You are, and none too soon,” laughed the time traveler. “Any day now, I may just fall apart and blow away. Lunch is waiting. Hike!”

A parade of one, Stiles marched off under the fluttering rotor shadows that made him seem a flickering newsreel of a future that had somehow passed.
Shumway, like a small dog after a great army, followed.

“What do you want to know?” asked the old man as they crossed the roof, double time.

“First,” gasped Shumway, keeping up, “why have you broken silence after a hundred years? Second, why to me? Third, what’s the big announcement you’re going to make this afternoon at four o’clock, the very hour when your younger self is due to arrive from the past—when, for a brief moment, you will appear in two places, the paradox: the person you were, the man you are, fused in one glorious hour for us to celebrate?”

The old man laughed. “How you do go on!”

“Sorry.” Shumway blushed. “I wrote that last night. Well. Those are the questions.”
“You shall have your answers.” The old man shook his elbow gently. “All in good—time.”

“You must excuse my excitement,” said Shumway. “After all, you are a mystery. You were famous, world-acclaimed. You went, saw the future, came back, told us, then went into seclusion. Oh, sure; for a few weeks, you traveled the world in ticker-tape parades, showed yourself on TV, wrote one book, gifted us with one magnificent two-hour television film, then shut yourself away here.

Yes, the time machine is on exhibit below, and crowds are allowed in each day at noon to see and touch. But you yourself have refused fame—”

“Not so.” The old man led him along the roof. Below in the gardens, other helicopters were arriving now, bringing TV equipment from around the world to photograph the miracle in the sky, that moment when the time machine from the past would appear, shimmer, then wander off to visit other cities before it vanished into the past. “I have been busy, as an architect, helping build that very future I saw when, as a young man, I arrived in our golden tomorrow!”

They stood for a moment watching the preparations below. Vast tables were being set up for food and drink. Dignitaries would be arriving soon from every country of the world to thank—for a final time, perhaps—this fabled, this almost mythic traveler of the years.

“Come along,” said the old man. “Would you like to come sit in the time machine? No one else ever has, you know. Would you like to be the first?”
No answer was necessary. The old man could see that the young man’s eyes were bright and wet.

“There, there,” said the old man. “Oh, dear me; there, there.”

A glass elevator sank and took them below and let them out in a pure white basement at the center of which stood—
The incredible device.

“There.” Stiles touched a button and the plastic shell that had for one hundred years encased the time machine slid aside. The old man nodded. “Go. Sit.”
Shumway moved slowly toward the machine.

Stiles touched another button and the machine lit up like a cavern of spider webs. It breathed in years and whispered forth remembrance. Ghosts were in its crystal veins. A great god spider had woven its tapestries in a single night.

It was haunted and it was alive. Unseen tides came and went in its machinery. Suns burned and moons hid their seasons in it. Here, an

autumn blew away in tatters; there, winters arrived in snows that drifted in spring blossoms to fall on summer fields.

The young man sat in the center of it all, unable to speak, gripping the armrests of the padded chair.
“Don’t be afraid,” said the old man gently. “I won’t send you on a journey.”
“I wouldn’t mind,” said Shumway.

The old man studied his face. “No, I can see you wouldn’t. You look like me one hundred years ago this day. Damn if you aren’t my honorary son.”
The young man shut his eyes at this, and the lids glistened as the ghosts in the machine sighed all about him and promised him tomorrows.

“Well, what do you think of my Toynbee Convector?” said the old man briskly, to break the spell.
He cut the power. The young man opened his eyes.
“The Toynbee Convector? What—”

“More mysteries, eh? The great Toynbee, that fine historian who said any group, any race, any world that did not run to seize the future and shape it was doomed to dust away in the grave, in the past.”
“Did he say that?”

“Or some such. He did. So, what better name for my machine, eh? Toynbee, wherever you are, here’s your future-seizing device!”
He grabbed the young man’s elbow and steered him out of the machine.

“Enough of that. It’s late. Almost time for the great arrival, eh? And the earth-shaking final announcement of that old time traveler Stiles! Jump!”

Back on the roof, they looked down on the gardens, which were now swarming with the famous and the near famous from across the world. The nearby roads were jammed; the skies were full of helicopters and

hovering biplanes. The hang gliders had long since given up and now stood along the cliff rim like a mob of bright pterodactyls, wings folded, heads up, staring at the clouds, waiting.

“All this,” the old man murmured, “my God, for me.”
The young man checked his watch.

“Ten minutes to four and counting. Almost time for the great arrival. Sorry; that’s what I called it when I wrote you up a week ago for the News. That moment of arrival and departure, in the blink of an eye, when, by stepping across time, you changed the whole future of the world from night to day, dark to light. I’ve often wondered—”

“What?”
Shumway studied the sky. “When you went ahead in time, did no one see you arrive? Did anyone at all happen to look up, do you know, and see your device hover in the middle of the air, here and over Chicago a bit later, and then New York and Paris? No one?”

“Well,” said the inventor of the Toynbee Convector, “I don’t suppose anyone was expecting me! And if people saw, they surely did not know what in blazes they were looking at. I was careful, anyway, not to linger too long.

I needed only time to photograph the rebuilt cities, the clean seas and rivers, the fresh, smog-free air, the unfortified nations, the saved and beloved whales. I moved quickly, photographed swiftly and ran back down the years home.

Today, paradoxically, is different. Millions upon millions of mobs of eyes will be looking up with great expectations. They will glance, will they not, from the young fool burning in the sky to the old fool here, still glad for his triumph?”

“They will,” said Shumway. “Oh, indeed, they will!”

A cork popped. Shumway turned from surveying the crowds on the nearby fields and the crowds of circling objects in the sky to see that Stiles had just opened a bottle of champagne.
“Our own private toast and our own private celebration.”

They held their glasses up, waiting for the precise and proper moment to drink.
“Five minutes to four and counting. Why,” said the young reporter, “did no one else ever travel in time?”

“I put a stop to it myself,” said the old man, leaning over the roof, looking down at the crowds. “I realized how dangerous it was. I was reliable, of course, no danger. But, Lord, think of it—just anyone rolling about the bowling-alley time corridors ahead, knocking tenpins headlong, frightening natives, shocking citizens somewhere else, fiddling with Napoleon’s life line behind or restoring Hitler’s cousins ahead?

No, no. And the government, of course, agreed—no, insisted—that we put the Toynbee Convector under sealed lock and key. Today, you were the first and last to fingerprint its machinery. The guard has been heavy and constant, for tens of thousands of days, to prevent the machine’s being stolen. What time do you have?”

Shumway glanced at his watch and took in his breath.
“One minute and counting down—”

He counted, the old man counted. They raised their champagne glasses.
“Nine, eight, seven—”

The crowds below were immensely silent. The sky whispered with expectation. The TV cameras swung up to scan and search.
“Six, five—”

They clinked their glasses.
“Four, three, two—”

They drank.
“One!”
They drank their champagne with a laugh. They looked to the sky. The golden air above the La Jolla coastline waited. The moment for the great arrival was here.
“Now!” cried the young reporter, like a magician giving orders.

“Now,” said Stiles, gravely quiet.
Nothing.
Five seconds passed.
The sky stood empty.
Ten seconds passed.
The heavens waited.
Twenty seconds passed.
Nothing.

At last, Shumway turned to stare and wonder at the old man by his side.
Stiles looked at him, shrugged and said:
“I lied.”

“You what!?” cried Shumway.
The crowds below shifted uneasily.
“I lied,” said the old man simply.
“No!”

“Oh, but yes,” said the time traveler. “I never went anywhere. I stayed but made it seem I went. There is no time machine—only something that looks like one.”
“But why?” cried the young man, bewildered, holding on to the rail at the edge of the roof. “Why?”

“I see that you have a tape-recording button on your lapel. Turn it on. Yes. There. I want everyone to hear this. Now.”
The old man finished his champagne and then said:
“Because I was born and raised in a time, in the sixties, seventies and eighties, when people had stopped believing in themselves. I saw that

disbelief, the reason that no longer gave itself reasons to survive, and was moved, depressed and then angered by it.

“Everywhere, I saw and heard doubt. Everywhere, I learned destruction. Everywhere was professional despair, intellectual ennui, political cynicism. And what wasn’t ennui and cynicism was rampant skepticism and incipient nihilism.”

The old man stopped, having remembered something. He bent and from under a table brought forth a special bottle of red Burgundy with the label 1984 on it. This, as he talked, he began to open, gently plumbing the ancient cork.

“You name it, we had it. The economy was a snail. The world was a cesspool. Economics remained an insoluble mystery. Melancholy was the attitude. The impossibility of change was the vogue. End of the world was the slogan.

“Nothing was worth doing. Go to bed at night full of bad news at eleven, wake up in the morn to worse news at seven. Trudge through the day underwater. Drown at night in a tide of plagues and pestilence. Ah!”

For the cork had softly popped. The now-harmless 1984 vintage was ready for airing. The time traveler sniffed it and nodded.

“Not only the four horsemen of the Apocalypse rode the horizon to fling themselves on our cities but a fifth horseman, worse than all the rest, rode with them: Despair, wrapped in dark shrouds of defeat, crying only repetitions of past disasters, present failures, future cowardices.

“Bombarded by dark chaff and no bright seed, what sort of harvest was there for man in the latter part of the incredible twentieth century?

“Forgotten was the moon, forgotten the red landscapes of Mars, the great eye of Jupiter, the stunning rings of Saturn. We refused to be comforted. We wept at the grave of our child, and the child was us.”

“Was that how it was,” asked Shumway quietly, “one hundred years ago?”

“Yes.” The time traveler held up the wine bottle as if it contained proof. He poured some into a glass, eyed it, inhaled, and went on. “You have seen the newsreels and read the books of that time. You know it all.

“Oh, of course, there were a few bright moments. When Salk delivered the world’s children to life. Or the night when Eagle landed and that one great step for mankind trod the moon. But in the minds and out of the mouths of many, the fifth horseman was darkly cheered on.

With high hopes, it sometimes seemed, of his winning. So all would be gloomily satisfied that their predictions of doom were right from day one. So the self-fulfilling prophecies were declared; we dug our graves and prepared to lie down in them.”

“And you couldn’t allow that?” asked the young reporter.
“You know I couldn’t.”
“And so you built the Toynbee Convector—”
“Not all at once. It took years to brood on it.”
The old man paused to swirl the dark wine, gaze at it and sip, eyes closed.

“Meanwhile, I drowned, I despaired, wept silently late nights thinking, What can I do to save us from ourselves? How to save my friends, my city, my state, my country, the entire world from this obsession with doom?

Well, it was in my library late one night that my hand, searching along shelves, touched at last on an old and beloved book by H. G. Wells. His time device called, ghostlike, down the years. I heard! I understood. I

truly listened. Then I blueprinted. I built. I traveled, or so it seemed. The rest, as you know, is history."
The old time traveler drank his wine, opened his eyes.

"Good God," the young reporter whispered, shaking his head. "Oh, dear God. Oh, the wonder, the wonder—"

There was an immense ferment in the lower gardens now and in the fields beyond and on the roads and in the air. Millions were still waiting. Where was the great arrival?

"Well, now," said the old man, filling another glass with wine for the young reporter. "Aren't I something?

I made the machines, built miniature cities, lakes, ponds, seas. Erected vast architectures against crystal-water skies, talked to dolphins, played with whales, faked tapes, mythologized films. Oh, it took years, years of sweating work and secret preparation before I announced my departure, left and came back with good news!"

They drank the rest of the vintage wine. There was a hum of voices. All of the people below were looking up at the roof.
The time traveler waved at them and turned.

"Quickly, now. It's up to you from here on. You have the tape, my voice on it, just freshly made. Here are three more tapes, with fuller data. Here's a film-cassette history of my whole inspired fraudulence. Here's a final manuscript. Take, take it all, hand it on. I nominate you as son to explain the father. Quickly!"

Hustled into the elevator once more, Shumway felt the world fall away beneath. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so gave, at last, a great hoot.
The old man, surprised, hooted with him, as they stepped out below and advanced upon the Toynbee Convector.

“You see the point, don’t you, son? Life has always been lying to ourselves! As boys, young men, old men. As girls, maidens, women, to gently lie and prove the lie true. To weave dreams and put brains and ideas and flesh and the truly real beneath the dreams. Everything, finally, is a promise.

What seems a lie is a ramshackle need, wishing to be born. Here. Thus and so.”
He pressed the button that raised the plastic shield, pressed another that started the time machine humming, then shuffled quickly in to thrust himself into the Convector’s seat.

“Throw the final switch, young man!”
“But—”

“You’re thinking,” here the old man laughed, “if the time machine is a fraud, it won’t work, what’s the use of throwing a switch, yes? Throw it, anyway. This time, it will work!”
Shumway turned, found the control switch, grabbed hold, then looked at Craig Bennett Stiles.

“I don’t understand. Where are you going?”

“Why, to be one with the ages, of course. To exist now, only in the deep past.”
“How can that be?”

“Believe me, this time it will happen. Good-bye, dear, fine, nice young man.”
“Good-bye.”

“Now. Tell me my name.”
“What?”
“Speak my name and throw the switch.”
“Time traveler?”
“Yes! Now!”

The young man yanked the switch. The machine hummed, roared, blazed with power.
“Oh,” said the old man, shutting his eyes. His mouth smiled gently. “Yes.”
His head fell forward on his chest.

Shumway yelled, banged the switch off and leaped forward to tear at the straps binding the old man in his device.

In the midst of so doing, he stopped, felt the time traveler’s wrist, put his fingers under the neck to test the pulse there and groaned. He began to weep.
The old man had, indeed, gone back in time, and its name was death. He was traveling in the past now, forever.

Shumway stepped back and turned the machine on again. If the old man were to travel, let the machine—symbolically, anyway—go with him. It made a sympathetic humming.

The fire of it, the bright sun fire, burned in all of its spider grids and armatures and lighted the cheeks and the vast brow of the ancient traveler, whose head seemed to nod with the vibrations and whose smile, as he traveled into darkness, was the smile of a child much satisfied.

The reporter stood for a long moment more, wiping his cheeks with the backs of his hands. Then, leaving the machine on, he turned, crossed the room, pressed the button for the glass elevator and, while he was waiting, took the time traveler’s tapes and cassettes from his jacket pockets and, one by one, shoved them into the incinerator trash flue set in the wall.

The elevator doors opened, he stepped in, the doors shut. The elevator hummed now, like yet another time device, taking him up into a stunned world, a waiting world, lifting him up into a bright continent, a future land, a wondrous and surviving planet . . .

That one man with one lie had created.

The End