

Professor Paul Jairus regarded the time machine's objective as sentimental rot . . . which made him the ideal observer to send on the mission.

THE TRAVELLER

by Richard Matheson

SILENT SNOWS DESCENDED LIKE a white curtain as Professor Paul Jairus hurried under the dim archway and onto the bare campus of Fort College.

His rubber-protected shoes squished aside the thin slush as he walked. He raised the collar of his heavy overcoat almost to the brim of his pulled down fedora. Then he drove his hands back into his coat pockets and clenched them into fists of chilled flesh.

He strode as rapidly as he could without getting the icy slush on his trousers and ankles. Clouds of steam puffed from his lips as he pressed on. He looked up a moment at the high granite face of the Physical Sciences Center far across the wide campus. Then he lowered his almost colorless face to avoid the cutting wind and hurried on around the curving

path, his feet carrying him past the line of skeletal trees whose branches stood brittle and black in the freezing air.

The wind seemed to push him back from his destination. It almost seemed to Jairus as if it were battling him. But that was pure imagination, of course. Keen desire to be over the preliminary steps only made them seem harder. He *was* anxious. In spite of endless self-examination and preparation, the thought of what he was soon to witness excited him. Far beyond the power of mind to chill or snow to whiten.

Or mind to caution.

Now he was past the edge of the huge building. It shielded Jairus from the wind and he raised his dark eyes. In his pockets, his hands flexed impatiently and he felt a strong inclination to

break into a run. He must watch himself. If he appeared too excitable they might change their minds about letting him go. They had responsibilities, after all. He took a deep breath and let the cold air into his lungs. Once the initial fascination had gone he'd be his old rational self. It was the uniqueness of the situation that was upsetting his usual balance. But it was ridiculous to be *this* anxious.

He pushed through the revolving door into the building and almost sighed with pleasure as the warm air rushed over him. He took off his hat and shook the drops onto the marble floor. Then he unbuttoned his coat as he turned right and started down the long hallway. His rubbers squeaked as he walked.

To think, the idea probed at his brain, in less than a half hour it will happen. He shook his head at the inexplicable import of it . . . Never mind, he told himself, control yourself, that's all. You'll need self control to resist the pummeling of false sentiment.

Near the end of the hall he stopped in front of a door, half blonde wood, half frosted glass. His eyes moved briefly over the printed words before he pushed in.

Dr. Phillips. Dr. Randall. A blank space, recently scratched out. And, underneath, in neat red letters, the word:

Chrono-Transposition.

"You understand clearly then," said Dr. Phillips in an urgent voice, "you are to make no attempt to affect your surroundings in any way."

Jairus nodded.

"We have to emphasize that," Dr. Randall spoke from his chair. "It's the essential point. Any physical imposition on your surroundings might be fatal to yourself. And . . ." He gestured. ". . . to our program."

"I quite understand," Jairus said. "You can depend on my discretion."

Randall nodded once. He held up his hands and drew the fingers together nervously. "I suppose you know about Wade," he said.

"I've heard rumors," Jairus replied. "But nothing specific."

"Professor Wade was lost in the last transposition," Dr. Phillips said soberly. "The chamber returned without him. We must assume he is dead."

"That was early in September," Randall said. "It's taken us over two months to convince the board to let us try again. If we fail this time . . . well, that's the end of it."

"I see," Jairus said.

"I hope you do, professor, I hope you do," Dr. Phillips broke in. "A great deal is at stake."

"Well, let's not depress him any more," Randall said with a

tired smile. "I think you also know you're about to see something a lot of people would willingly give their lives to see."

"I know it," Jairus said. I also know a lot of people are fools, he thought.

"Shall we go then?" Randall asked.

The footsteps of the three men echoed in the hallway as they walked toward the Apparatus Laboratory. Jairus kept his hands in his coat pockets and did not speak except to make brief replies to their questions. Randall was telling him about the time screen.

"We've discarded the chamber as a dangerous vehicle for travel," Randall said. "You will travel in a circular energy screen which will render you invisible to the people you'll see. The screen *can* be broken by you but I think we've made it clear how perilous that can be."

"You will *please* remain within the screen boundaries," Phillips emphasized. "You must understand that."

"Yes," Jairus said. "I understand it."

"As an added measure, though," Randall said, "you will communicate with us through a chest speaker. This will give us information as you see it. And, also, if you feel any uneasiness, any premonition of danger to yourself—why, you have only to tell us and we'll bring you back immediately. At

any rate your . . . *visit*, shall we say, will not exceed one hour."

An hour, Jairus thought. More than enough time to dispel the fallacies of the ages.

"With your health, your education, your background," Randall was saying, "you should have no difficulties."

"One thing I've wondered," Jairus said. "What makes you pick out this particular event instead of any other?"

Randall shrugged. "Maybe because it's almost Christmas."

Sentimental rot, Jairus thought.

They pushed through the heavy metal doors in the Apparatus Laboratory and Jairus saw graduate students moving around a metal platform set on conductor bars arranged like ties. The white-frosted students were setting up and adjusting what appeared to be colored spotlights all pointed to one spot on the platform.

Phillips went into the control room and Randall led Jairus to the platform and introduced him to the students. Then he checked the platform and the lights while Jairus stood by, nervous in spite of self-regimentation, heartbeats trembling his lean body.

Watch it now, he told himself, no emotional involvement. There, that's better. This is exciting, yes, but only as a scientific accomplishment, remember. The wonder is in the visiting and not the moment I am to visit. Years of study

have made that quite clear. It's nothing.

That's what he kept telling himself as he stood there on the platform, his hands shaking, watching the lab disappear as though it were blotted away. Feeling his heart pound violently and being unable to stop the pounding with rational words. Words that were: it's nothing, *nothing*. It's only an execution, only an execution, only . . .

I'm standing on Golgotha.

It's about nine o'clock in the morning. The skies are clear. There are no clouds, the sun is bright. This place, the so-called place of the skull, is a bare, un-vegetated eminence about a half mile from the walls of Jerusalem. The hill is to the northwest of the city on a high, uneven plain which extends between the walls of the city and the two valleys of Kedron and Hinnom.

It's a very depressing location. Something akin to an unkempt city lot in our own times. From where I stand I can see discarded garbage and even animal excrement. A few dogs are foraging in the garbage. Quite depressing.

The hill is deserted except for two Roman soldiers. They're putting the upright stakes into the ground, hammering them with mallets into the holes they've dug. Looking around I can see a few people straggling up the hill. Ap-

parently they want to get a good spot to watch the execution. You always find those kind of people, I guess.

It's warm here. I can feel the heat through the screen. The smell too. It's most offensive. There are large flies around. They move in and out of the energy screen without seeming to be blocked. I suppose that means people will do the same.

THAT'S CORRECT, PROFESSOR.

Wait. I can see a cloud of dust. A procession is coming this way. About ten to fifteen soldiers, I'd judge. And there are three men. Two quite burly ones in the lead. In the rear is a . . . is *him*. He's . . . oh, the dust is hiding him.

The two soldiers here are finished with their stakes. They're putting on their armor. Now they're buckling on their swords. One of the people asks them how soon it will start. The soldier says soon enough. Now they're . . .

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SOMETHING WRONG?

No, no, I'm just watching. I'm sorry. I should be talking. It's a little hard to remember.

Well, *apparently*, the legend about Simon of Cyrene is factual. The last man . . . *him*, dropped to the earth on his knees. Those cross beams . . . they must weigh almost 200 pounds. The man

can't get up. Now the soldiers are beating him. He can't rise. Too weak, I guess. Some other soldiers are forcing a passerby to lift the cross beam from the man's shoulders. The man stands. He follows behind Simon. I'll assume it's Simon of Cyrene. It can't be proved, of course.

Now the procession is quite close. I can see the two thieves. They're large men, hairy armed with long, dirty robes on their bodies. They don't seem to be having any trouble with their burdens. One of them is even laughing, it appears. Yes, he *is*. He just said something to one of the soldiers and the soldier laughed too.

They're almost here. I can . . .
I can see Jesus.

He's bent over but I can see he's quite tall. Over six feet I'd say. But he's quite thin. He's obviously been fasting. His face and hands are almost white from dust. He's stumbling. He just coughed from the dust in his lungs. His robe is dirty too. There are stains all over it. Apparently . . . they've been throwing dung at him.

His face is without expression. Very stolid. His eyes look lifeless. He stares ahead of himself as he moves on. His beard is uncombed and tangled, so is his hair. He looks as if he's half dead already. As a matter of fact he looks . . . quite *ordinary*. Yes, he . . .

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PROFESSOR JAIRUS?

They're here now. I'm standing about seven yards away from the stakes. I can see the three men quite clearly. I can even see the wounds around the head of Jesus. Again I can only assume. That the wounds were made by a crown of thorns, I mean. One can't be sure. The gouges appear to be still oozing blood. His temples and hair are caked with it. There's even a line of blood running down his left cheek. He looks terrible, quite terrible. I wonder if the man knows what it's like to be crucified.

They're stripping his clothes off.

They're also taking off the clothes of the two . . . thieves, I suppose they are. They might be murderers, one can't say. At any rate, they're all having their clothes taken from them. They're naked now.

He's thin, my *God*, he's thin. What brainless sort of faith prescribes starvation for a man?

Excuse my comments, gentlemen. I'm liable to make them without thinking. I have rather definite opinions on this moment and this man.

Jesus is quite emaciated. Muscular though. Quite well built. A little flesh and he'd look . . . almost excellent. Now I can see his face a little better. It's . . . rather handsome. Yes, under ideal cir-

cumstances this man *might* be extremely handsome. One might then understand his magnetic control over people, his seeming . . . *aura* of supernatural prescience.

WHAT'S HAPPENING, PROFESSOR?

The soldiers are forcing the three men on their backs. Their arms are being extended along the cross beams. Are they to be lashed or . . .

They *were*—I mean they *are* being . . . Uh! Good God, can you hear the sound of it? Oh my God. Right through their palms! *Sickening* practice. These ancients certainly have their foul ways.

This crucifixion business—a horrible thing. A man can last three or four days if his constitution is strong enough—if he survives the impeded circulation, the headaches, the hunger, the wracking cramps, hemorrhage, sycophancy of the heart. Either hunger or thirst will get them, probably thirst.

I hope to heaven they don't practice *crurifragium*, that brutal beating to death with mallets. History says nothing of it in this case but how can anyone know? Except—the idea occurs—except *me*.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

They're being raised. The soldiers are lifting them with the cross beams. The thieves are jumping up in order to avoid torn palms. They're roaring with anger and pain.

He can't get up. They're—oh God!—they're *pulling* him up by his nailed palms! His face has gone *white*. But he doesn't cry out. His lips are pressed together, they're drained of color. He refuses to cry out. The man's a *fanatic*.

IS THE PLACE CROWDED, PROFESSOR?

No, no, there's no one around. The soldiers are keeping people away. There are a few people but none closer than thirty yards. A few men. And, yes, some women. Three I see together. They could possibly be the three mentioned by Matthew and Mark.

But no one else. I see no man who could be John. No woman who could be the mother of Jesus. And surely I'd recognize Mary of Magdalene. No one but those three women. No one seems to care, that is. The rest, apparently, are here for the . . . the show. Good God how this scene has been garbled and obscured by pious gilding. I can—I can hardly express how *dreary* it all is, how common and ordinary. Not that killing a man this way is ordinary but . . . well, where are the portents, the signs, the miracles?

Biblical drivel.

WHAT'S HAPPENING, JAI-RUS?

Well, he's been put up. The cross is, of course, not at all as pictured in religious rite. It's really a low wooden structure resem-

bling a letter T. The stem was already in the ground as I've said and the cross beam was put on top of it and nailed and lashed. The feet of the three men are only inches from the ground. That serves the purpose as well as if it were many feet.

And, speaking of feet, the feet of the three men were lashed, not nailed to the stake. And between their legs is a—a spar, a peg. It supports their bodies. I'd rather expected one under their feet too. Apparently I'm wrong on that count.

It is—*bizarre* though, how people in our time can believe a man weighing—oh, it must be at least 170 pounds—could *hang* from a cross merely by nails through palms and feet. They attribute to the human flesh far more durability than it possesses.

Now the soldiers are . . .

WHAT ABOUT THE TITULAR INSCRIPTION, PROFESSOR?

Oh, yes, yes. Well, they *are* in three languages, it appears. There's Greek. There's Hebrew and Latin. Let me see . . . uh . . . *Jesus of . . . Nazareth—yes—Jesus of Nazareth. The . . . King . . . King of the Jews.* That's the complete inscription. Have you got that? *Jesus of Nazareth. The King of the Jews.* Apparently John had some factual information about the crucifixion anyway. Even if he isn't here as he claimed.

Ah, yes. The soldiers are holding a drink up to Jesus. I assume it's the soporific intended to induce stupefaction that the Jerusalem women are reputed to have prepared for all such condemned criminals.

Ah. He refuses it. He turns his head to the side. The soldier is angry. He draws back as if he means to strike Jesus. But he changes his mind.

The other two men are drinking the wine and myrrh the soldiers hold to their lips. They're smacking their lips. One of them says something. I didn't hear all of it. I heard the word *good* though. They're both smacking their lips.

One of them, apparently, is asking for the drink Jesus refused. He doesn't get it. He turns and jeers at Jesus for not drinking it. He speaks so fast I can't catch his words. I think he must be half drunk with terror anyway. Soon he'll be insensible from the drink though. That will be his release. Jesus chooses to have no release.

That's his privilege as self-appointed martyr.

YOU WERE SAYING BEFORE ABOUT THE SOLDIERS, PROFESSOR?

The soldiers? Oh—oh yes. They're casting lots for the clothes. I imagine I don't have to tell you that there's no robe I can see that has no seam. All three are ordinary robes with very visible seams.

Well, that seems to complete the basic details. The three are up. I'll study Jesus now a little. May I move closer?

IF YOU WISH, BUT BE ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN YOU REMAIN WITHIN THE ENERGY SCREEN.

I'll be careful. I'm moving. I'm about six yards away now. Five—three—t . . . this will do. I don't think I should . . . I don't think I'd better get any closer.

IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT?

Quite—quite all right. I-uh-am a little nervous, that's all. After all, this is Jesus. I almost feel as if he can—well, that's absurd. How powerful a hold superstition holds on the mind.

Yes, he's quite young. In his thirties, I'd judge. As I said, in good health and groomed, he might be a stunning figure. He might even understandably be taken for some sort of messianic deliverer.

His skin is clear. Dirty, of course, but . . . clear. His mouth is rather wide, full lipped. A strong line. His nose isn't hooked. It looks almost—oh, I don't know—almost Grecian, you might say. He is quite handsome. Yes. He's quite a handsome man.

The eyes are . . .

.....

PROFESSOR?

Well, at least our theories are vindicated that later description of the crucifixion is almost primarily based on prophecy. It's obvious that very little in the Bible transcription of the scene is factual. There is no John, no mother of Jesus, no Mary of Magdalene, no others supposed to be here. I've heard no words from Jesus. No one has jeered at him except that thief and that was only because the thief was angry he didn't get the second drink of drugged wine. And there are no signs.

No, I think we can safely say that the later chroniclers, intent on substantiating the old Psalms auguries, put together the account of the crucifixion with Old Testament in lap. These Psalms, the 22nd, 31st, 38th and 69th to the fore, plus Christian imagination—made the crucifixion something—*quite* different from what it actually was. From what it is as I stand here.

I . . . oh

.....

WHAT IS IT, PROFESSOR?

He just . . . spoke.

He spoke. He said—Eloi. He said *God* in his own language. His face is white and drawn. The lines of *pain* on it . . .

His face—it's so . . . so *gentle*. Even now in this moment of terrible pain, he . . .

Undoubtedly auto-suggested

hypnosis, easily effected due to his exhaustion and emotional fervor. I'm sure the poor dev—man must feel some sort of . . . violent ecstasy of pain. Maybe he doesn't even feel pain at all. Perhaps his heightened body functioning, his exacerbated adrenalin flow—prevent feeling. It's perfectly* feasible. His eyes are . . . his—his eyes are . . .

ARE THERE ANY SIGNS OF NATURAL DISORDER, PROFESSOR JAIRUS?

I assume you—refer to the earthquake recorded or the dark skies or the tombs rent open or a half dozen other things spoken about in the Bible and other sources.

No, I'm afraid not.

No dark skies. The sun is still very bright and very hot. The ground is as steady as a rock. The records *err* slightly. Obviously the authors of the records weren't satisfied with this and decided to add religious significance to an otherwise unreligious moment. Hand of God and all that rot.

It makes me furious, really. Isn't the moment enough in itself? Isn't it terrible and violent enough for . . . oh, the damnable pedantry of—!

.....

PROFESSOR, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

What?

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? ARE YOU FEELING ILL?

I'm . . . quite well. Thank you.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

.....

PROFESSOR?

Those eyes. Those *eyes*. My God, they're so—they're so *hurt*! Like a father who's been beaten by his own children. Yet who still loves his children. Who's been set upon by loved ones and *stripped* and *beaten* and *nailed* and *humiliated*! Is there no—

PROFESSOR.

I'm—I'm—I'm all right. I'm quite—quite all right. It's just that . . . it is upsetting. This man has done nothing and—oh, my God, there's a *fly* on his lips! *Get off!*

.....

WHAT'S HAPPENING, PROFESSOR JAIRUS? ARE YOU—

They're giving him a drink. He must be horribly thirsty. The sun is so hot. I'm thirsty myself.

A soldier just dipped a sponge into a pail of *posca*, the soldiers' drink of vinegar and water. Now he's put the sponge on a broken reed which was lying on the ground. He touches the sponge to the mouth of Jesus.

He . . . sucks the sponge. His lips tremble. It must taste horrible

—*bitter* and *warm*. God, why don't they give him a real drink—some cool water? Have they no pity for the—

PROFESSOR, YOU'D BETTER GET READY TO COME BACK NOW. YOU'VE BEEN GONE ALMOST FORTY MINUTES ALREADY. YOU'VE DONE WHAT'S TO BE DONE.

No, don't take me back yet—not just yet. A little while. Just a little while. I'll be all right. I swear I'll be all right. Just let me—stay here with him. Don't take me, not now. *Please*.

PROFESSOR JAIRUS.

His eyes, his eyes—*his eyes*! Oh my God in heaven, they're looking at me! He *sees* me! I'm sure of it! He *sees* me!

WE'RE BRINGING YOU BACK.

No, not yet. I'm—I must . . . I . . .

DON'T GET OUT OF THE SCREEN.

Out of the screen? Yes, maybe I can—I could . . .

YOU'RE COMING BACK.

No! No, I'll break the screen if you try to bring me back! I'll—I'll go *through* it! I swear I will—don't touch me!

PROFESSOR, STOP IT!

I've got to stop them! I've got to *stop* them! I'm here, I can save him! I *can*! Why can't I take him into the screen with me and take him away?

JAIRUS, USE YOUR HEAD!

Why not, damn it, why *not*! I'm not going to stand here and let them destroy him! He's too good, too gentle. I can save him—I *can*!

JAIRUS, YOU'VE DONE YOUR JOB! NOW LET HIM DO *HIS*!

No!

LOCK THE SCREEN.

What! What are you doing?

WE'LL HAVE TO CHANCE BRINGING HIM BACK IN THE FEW SECONDS THE SCREEN LOCK WILL HOLD.

Let me out! God help me, let me free! Stop it, you don't know what you're doing!

QUICKLY!

No! Stop—*stop*! Don't take me! *Don't*! LOOK OUT!

They dragged him, frenzied and kicking from the platform. They carried him into the office and put him down on a cot and Doctor Randall drove a syringe into his arm.

In a half hour Professor Jairus was quiet enough to swallow a glass of brandy. He sat in a big leather chair, staring straight ahead, his eyes lifeless. His mind had not returned with his body—it was still back on a lonely hill beyond Jerusalem.

There were things he could have told them; word pictures to bolster history. He could have described the clothes worn on Golgotha, the words spoken there, the moment in its bleak and brutal en-

tirety—all this he could have told them. Told them especially that, in bringing him back so quickly, they had caused the phenomena which the Bible recorded as a quaking of earth and a renting of rocks.

None of these things did he tell them.

He told them he wanted to go home.

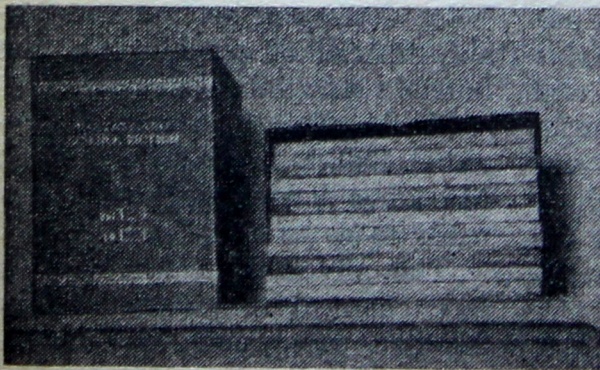
He put on his coat and hat and overshoes and walked into the grey murk of afternoon. His rubber covered shoes crunched in the hard packed snow, his eyes stared

into a curtain of soft-falling snow.

The other things are not important, he was thinking. True or untrue they didn't matter. The water into wine, the lepers cleansed, the sick healed, the walking on water, the return from the grave—none of them mattered. Men who sought for hope in physical miracles only were childish dreamers who could never save the world.

A man had given up his life for the things he believed in. *That was miracle enough for anyone.*

It was Christmas Eve and it was a lovely time to find a faith.



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