

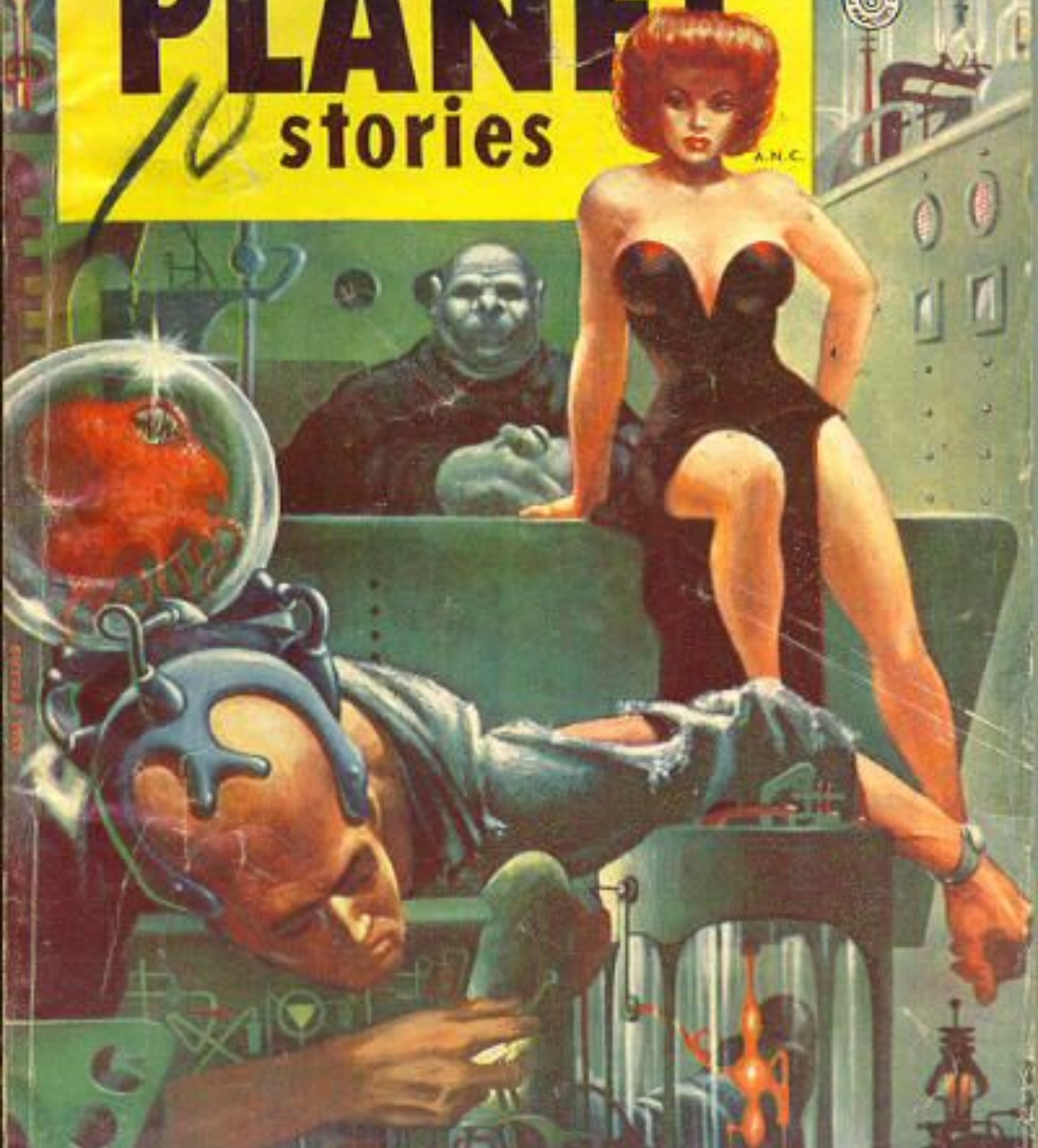
STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

# PLANET stories

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A.N.C.



They throw a dragnet over the stars to stop the Horetic

## THE MAN THE TECH-MEN MADE

a future-worlds novelet by FOX B. HOLDEN

**SWORD OF TORMAIN** by Eric Storm

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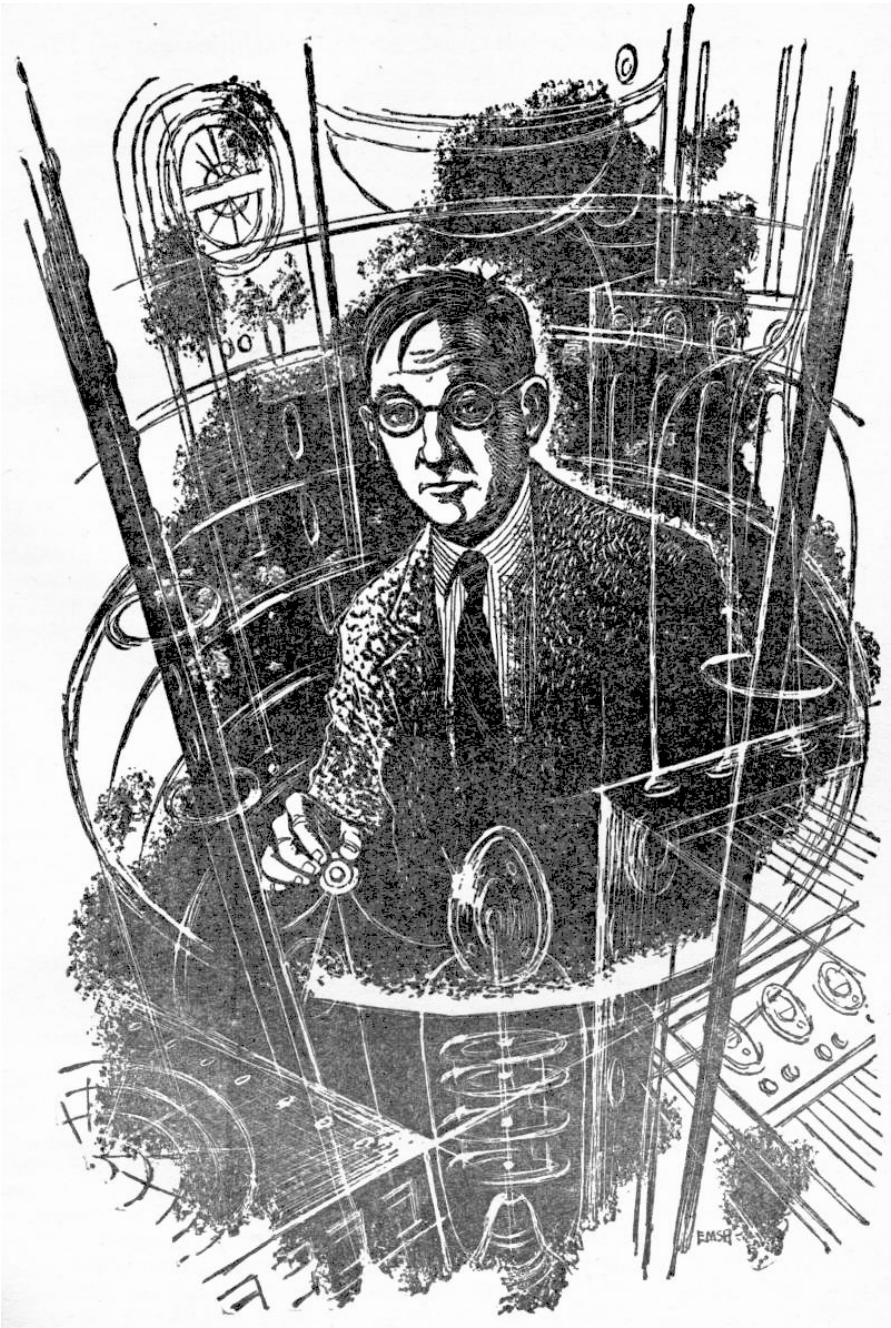
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# THE TOY

By

# BRYAN BERRY

First published *Planet Stories*, March 1954

*It was Fletcher Gibson's birthday, and certainly for a man so lonely, so distraught, so out of place in this twenty-fourth century . . . it was only right and proper to buy him an Imagi-toy.*

All of a sudden, as if from nowhere, (or as if from some magician's gigantic but invisible hat) Gibson appeared, blinking and touching himself to make sure he was really there. He pinched himself tentatively and it hurt. He was really there! The sun was warming. The trees were fine and old and green and just as they had been. And it was only three minutes walk to his own home.

Three minutes walk! He laughed aloud.

A dog that had been busy nibbling itself nearby looked up, all amazed, at this man who was standing alone in the middle of the road, feeling himself gingerly and laughing.

And then, with strange and excited little cries Mr. Fletcher Gibson started to run awkwardly off down Maple Avenue into the deep afternoon shadow of the tree tunnel that led to the south end of the small and slumbering town.

But that isn't the start of the story. Oh no. And we're not going to start at the start, anyway, for time's a peculiar thing and frequently "start" and "end" are pretty well meaningless words as you'll possibly agree and possibly won't.

Anyhow, by your leave, we'll start the tale at what may as well be called, for want of a better word, the "middle."

---

Fletcher Gibson muttered many unprintable words. He pressed many buttons and a number of lights winked on the dashboard. Green lights, red lights. One blue light. But nothing else happened at all. The turbo-car refused to move another inch.

He'd had trouble before but it had never cracked up on him like this. And only a few yards from the drive, too. It might have waited until he'd got it into the garage.

He snorted his irritation and opened the door, stepping out onto the sidewalk.

"Hullo, Mr. Gibson," a voice said. He turned. It was Jim Saxby, his neighbor's son.

"Why, hullo there, Jimmy."

"Car broke down?"

Fletcher Gibson ran a finger round his collar, nodded. "That's about it, I guess."

The boy's foot tapped the sidewalk. "Can I take a look?" he asked, a small, shy smile creeping about his mouth, lingering.

Fletcher Gibson frowned, then laughed. "Sure you can, son," he said, hating the boy, hating himself and his predicament. Hating, in fact, everything. Everything.

And why should he hate everything, you ask? Well, you'd hate everything, too, wouldn't you, if you were the last man—the very last, mind—in the world? And that's what Gibson was, you see. Ah yes, I know Jimmy Saxby was talking to him, but then Jimmy Saxby wasn't human. Wasn't human at all.

"There's your trouble," said the boy, pointing an eleven year old finger at the closed bonnet of the turbo-car, his eyes flecking momentarily with gold, then clearing, brightening.

Gibson opened his mouth, closed it.

The boy, watching him, seemed suddenly abashed. “Gee, I didn’t mean . . .” he started, looking down.

“That’s all right, son. Let’s open the bonnet up, shall we? Then you can show me what’s wrong.”

The kid hadn’t meant it. All the others had strict instructions not to use their non-human powers when he was around and, normally, they didn’t. The Saxby kid had just made a slip, that was all. He’d forgotten who he was talking to and had used X-ray vision and stepped up his mechanical perception so that he could find the fault in the shortest possible time. He hadn’t meant to do it; it had just come naturally to him and he’d forgotten that he wasn’t dealing with one of his own kind.

They lifted the bonnet of the turbo-car. The boy pointed again. “Somewhere there,” he said, knowing the exact spot but pretending he didn’t. “Ah.”

“Found it, Jimmy?”

“Think so, yeah.”

Think so, he says. He knows so. “Anything be done about it or will I have to visor the garage?”

“Well, if you wouldn’t mind, I guess I might be able to fix her for you.”

He guesses he might. Might! “Go right ahead, Jimmy. If you can manage it I’d be very grateful.”

The boy smiled, delving into the metal brain of the car. His fingers fluttered, adjusting swiftly. “Press the switch now,” he instructed, a minute later.

Gibson did so. There was a purr. A hum. A faint thunder. The turbo-car was mended and Fletcher Gibson got inside and said: “Thanks very much, Jimmy. Lucky for me you were passing,” and he smiled with his mouth but his eyes were savage.

“Any time, Mr. Gibson,” said the boy, grinning brightly. “Any time.”

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Fletcher Gibson drove the car up the street, up the drive into his garage. He stilled the motor and sat in the fresh cool silence while the savagery drained away out of him. It was stupid to get mad about things. Stupid. Yet wouldn’t anyone get mad if they were in his position? Even that, when you thought about it, was stupid; no one else *could* be in his position. He was unique. Alone. Solitary. Oh, very damned solitary.

The savagery returned.

He slammed out of the car and into the house. Slam bang here, slam bang there. It didn’t help very much and it was very childish, of course, and he should have known better. He should have grown used to things being the way they were; should have acclimatized himself—wasn’t that the word they used? Oh, they were very good to him. Treated him fine, when you considered it all. Tried not to use any of their powers when he was about. Tried, too, not to be impatient when they were telling him things and he had to concentrate and think hard before he could take it in.

Why was he in this predicament? What was he doing here among strange people in a strange time he should never have seen but only, maybe, dreamed about? Ah well, it happened that this man Fletcher Gibson, and none other, was the one who went forward in time in the fine year 1954 and of whom not a toenail, limb, eyebrow, scrap of skin, fragment of intestine or anything at all was ever seen again. Ever.

He didn’t go five years into the future, as he was supposed to have done, because something went wrong somewhere, (a bit of grit fouling a cog in the time machine? A decimal

point wrong in a calculation?) and on he went, Mr. Fletcher Gibson, the traveler in time, on and on, all unknowing, to land himself many, many years ahead of where he should have done.

And there weren't any humans there, when he arrived. Not real humans. Not the sort he'd left behind him.

They didn't have tentacles or seven heads or anything of that nature, mind. There weren't any physical differences, unless you counted the generally finer cast of features and the odd gilding of the eyes when they applied X-ray vision. But they weren't homo sapiens. They'd been called homo superior by their discoverers, and now that their discoverers had died out they were just, simply, men.

Except to Fletcher Gibson.

They had told him, when he arrived bewildered in their midst, that he couldn't go back again. They looked up the year 1954 in their history books and discovered that a Fletcher Gibson *had* gone into a time machine but had never come out of it. Thus history said he hadn't returned from the future so obviously they couldn't allow him to return, a pity though it was.

He'd argued with them for a long time but they were adamant. They didn't feel that history ought to be upset and, while they were very sorry for him, of course, they didn't see what they could do except keep him safe, secure and as happy as possible in their own time period until he died.

So here was Fletcher Gibson, now, after five years of being kept safe and secure, still very far from being happy about anything at all.

Even the kids were brighter than he was, he savagely thought. That Saxby brat, now, fixing up his turbo-car that way. The boy had seen what was wrong instantly and had almost certainly spent longer than necessary fixing the darned thing once he had realized that he was talking to the anachronistic Mr. Gibson. Such kindness. Such condescension. Pagh!

And this house, too. It wasn't his. Not really his. They'd given it to him. They'd provided him with the wherewithall to live, also, just so's he wouldn't always be at them about getting back to his own time and so on and so forth. So, of course, he was really being kept. *Kept!*

If he'd been a prisoner, he thought, it would have been better, in a way, than this. At least he'd be able to hate his captors without feeling ashamed when he did so. But this—this protective custody, this helpfulness, this considerate kindness, hateful, hateful!

He indicated how hateful he thought it was by scowling fiercely out of the window at the bright emerald lawn and the small pleasant trees of the garden out front. The scowl faded. He was about to have, he noticed, a visitor.

A round, chubby pumpkin of a man he was, this visitor, and he trotted up the path and rang the bell and said what his name was to the robot voice-lock and then, when the door was open, beamed in at Gibson. "Well hullo there. Glad you're at home."

Gibson held the door open and ushered his visitor through into the lounge. Harry Packer was one of the few of these strange people with whom he ever felt at ease and this was probably due to Packer's interest in the ancient race homo sapiens of which Gibson himself was a living fossil member.

"And what brought you here?" he enquired when his visitor was seated, glass in hand, cigarette lit.

Packer waved a hand. "Nothing special," he lied. "Just thought I'd drop in. Had the day off from work as a matter of fact."

"Illness?"

“That’s what I told the boss on the visor,” Packer grinned. “Real reason was that I wanted to go across to Central City to pick up my kid’s birthday present. Just got back.”

“Birthday, ha!” said Gibson sourly. “I got a birthday coming up soon.”

“Yes?” said Packer vaguely, though this was what he had come to find out. “When?”

“Twenty-seventh of this month to be exact,” grunted Gibson. “Fine lot of presents I shall get with everyone I knew dead and buried in their graves and . . .”

“Now we mustn’t get bitter,” said Packer, “must we? Doesn’t do any good at all. Besides, I may have some good news for you soon . . .”

“Good news? What do you mean?”

“I’ve been investigating.”

“Yes?”

“The Government Security people . . .”

Gibson’s eyes were very bright. “Yes? What did they tell you? Can they send me back? *Will* they send me back?” He was quivering with excitement. All over, shaking. Quiver, shake. Quiver, shake.

“Don’t get all worked up, now. Nothing definite yet. They’re making further investigations, though. Seems someone’s come up with the old theory of parallel time tracks once more. They think that if they can get you back to a time track that says you *did* return, then everything’ll be all right.”

“Then they’ve got a time machine? I can return?” He was beside himself with excitement.

Packer shook his head. “Not yet. Like I told you, they’re still investigating. You’ll have to be patient.” He had said too much already and he realized it. “I’ll let you know what happens. Don’t go trying to contact the Government people, now, or you’ll upset everything. Leave it all to me.” His cigarette enabled a gray smoke tree to grow, leaf, bloom, disperse its leaves and fade away.

“But I don’t see why . . .” began Gibson.

“Ask no questions,” said Mr. Packer, raising a cautionary hand, “and you’ll be told no lies. Leave everything to me and, above all, be patient.” And with that he went on to talk of other, less interesting things to which his host, as was natural under the circumstances, paid scant attention.

“Now promise,” Packer said, on the doorstep later, about to go. “Promise you won’t go and spoil everything by trying to visor the Government people.”

“Oh, all right. I promise,” said Gibson. “Thanks for letting me know about it, anyway. Good-bye.” The door closed. He was alone once again. Yet somehow not so very much alone as before. Hope had entered with Mr. Packer’s words; had entered and remained. Hope of escape, hope of return to normality out of this terrible world where men weren’t men at all. Gibson watched his visitor’s retreating figure as it pattered down the path and stepped onto the moving sidewalk to be carried out of sight among the plastoid villas. He’s one of them, he thought, watching. But the savagery had gone and hope, small, of pin-head size but warming and soothing nevertheless, had taken its place.

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Now the 27th of the month—Fletcher Gibson’s birthday, you’ll recall—fell on a Saturday, and a fine golden sort of a day it was, too. The sky was a sheet of blue silk with just a handful of woollen clouds crouching in a corner of it, far off; and there were plenty of birds singing and numerous trees all a-bloom and anyone seeing such a fine day would have found it hard to believe that anyone could be anything but happy at such a time.

But Mr. Gibson, waking from an afternoon nap, had a scowl upon his face. Six days, he thought as he rolled the salt taste of sleep about and around in his mouth. Six days since Packer had come and babbled about the Government people planning to send him back and still no sign of anything being done. He grunted, remembering what day it was. Here it was his birthday, too, and him years and years ahead of where he should have been. No cards, no presents. Bah!

The bell chimed.

He stirred himself, hearing the voice-lock announce that Mr. Harry Packer was once again calling on him.

“Happy birthday,” said Packer, red-apple cheeks glowing. Behind him, clustered round the porch, were other neighbors. Paul Saxby, his wife and son; the Mortimers, the Schultz family. All smiling. All saying: “Happy birthday.”

Gibson was taken aback. He blinked, peered, scratched his chin, opened his eyes wider, made noises in his throat and at last, as though with great difficulty, said: “Why—why, thank you.”

“Thought we’d let you know we hadn’t forgotten your birthday,” said Packer, airily waving a hand to indicate the neighbors grouped behind him. “Got a present for you, too.”

“A present?”

“That’s right. Bet you can’t guess what it is.” He turned to the others, grinning. “Bet he can’t guess, eh?”

They laughed and nodded, voicelessly agreeing.

Mr. Gibson was bewildered, was amazed. And then, like a seed that germinates and produces a shoot in sweet spring rains, an idea grew inside him, becoming a great hope, a yearning, a desire, a belief, a certainty!

“I believe he’s guessed it,” laughed Packer, studying him.

“Not . . . ?”

“Well, what do you want most of all, eh, Gibson?”

“You can’t mean . . . ?”

“Nothing else but. Finally got it fixed up with the Government people. Thought we’d save it up for your birthday, didn’t we?” he enquired of the others.

They assured Gibson that that had been what they’d thought.

“Oh thank you, thank you!” shrilled Gibson in delight. “Where do I have to go? What must I do? Will I get back to where I started from? Will I? Can I? Shall I?” He ran out of breath, waved his hands, then said: “Oh, come inside, everybody. Come inside.”

They sat in the lounge and drank while Packer explained things. “You don’t have to worry a scrap, now. You’ll go right back to a time track which says you did return. But the five years you’ve spent here will also have elapsed in the world you’re returning to. You’ll go back but you’ll be five years older than when you left. O.K.?”

“Yes. Oh, yes.”

“When do you want to leave?”

“Today. Now. This minute,” laughed Fletcher Gibson, bouncing his lean, soured body up and down on the spongy couch like a three year old.

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So then and there it was decided. Packer told him that they could not all go with him to the place where the temporal displacer, or time machine, had been constructed. He alone would accompany him.



On the doorstep, after shutting all the doors and switching off the electroboiler, Gibson said fond farewells to all his neighbors who, to a man, woman and child, wished him good luck on his journey through the years back and back to his final strange destination.

Packer took him, then, by turbo-car through the summer-gilded town along the white roads. They drove for half an hour.

“Where is this machine? Why have the Government people themselves never told me about these investigations?” queried Gibson.

His companion smiled. “Ask no questions,” he said, “and you’ll be told no lies. We’re almost there. Be patient.”

“But we’re going back again. We’ve been driving in a circle.”

“I know. Never mind.”

“But this is my street we’re turning down.”

“Yes.”

“And my house we’re stopping at.”

Mr. Packer stilled the motor, staring at his companion. “They’ve been fixing up the machine,” he explained, “inside your house.”

“Fixing up. . . in THERE?”

“That’s right. Come on. It’ll be ready by now.” He led the bewildered Gibson up his own drive and into his own house and then through to the lounge he had left so recently. “Here we are,” he said.

A small machine stood near the door that led into the study. Gibson saw that a good deal of the study furniture had been piled about here and there in the lounge. Wires from the machine ran through freshly bored holes in the wall that divided the two rooms. It was all very strange. Mr. Gibson said that he thought it was all very strange. Packer nodded.

“Wasn’t like this, I suppose, when you got into that first time machine?”

Gibson shook his head. “Not a bit like it. Are you sure this thing’s going to work?” He was a little frightened now.

“Sure it’ll work,” Packer said heartily. “Now listen while I tell you what to do. Go straight into that study there the moment I tell you. The study itself is the time machine, now, thanks to this machine here. As soon as you go through you’ll step out of this time period into one you’ll recognize. You’ll end up somewhere in the town you left so many years ago. You’ll have some explaining to do, of course. People will want to know where you’ve come from, where you’ve been and so on. I suggest you use amnesia as your excuse. It’ll be safest and easiest, too. The professor who built that time machine and sent you into the future died, according to the books we discovered, two years after you vanished, so if you say you never stepped into that time machine there’ll be nobody there to say otherwise. O.K. now?”

Gibson nodded, the fright leaving him and a huge and very wonderful anticipation taking its place. He stood beside the study door.

Packer switched switches on the machine, pushed buttons. There was a humming as of a million bees.

“Now,” said Packer. . . .

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When Packer walked back down the path they had already started fixing the “NO TRESPASSING: BY ORDER OF THE GOVERNMENT” sign on Gibson’s front gate. The force field projector was being brought up from the parked turbo-lorry, too. The driver was

leaning out of the cab window. "Afternoon," he said, nodding to Packer. "I heard about what's been going on in there. How did he take it?"

Packer smiled tiredly. "Like a lamb," he replied. "It was more or less what he wanted."

"You really had a temporal displacer rigged up in there?"

"Lord no. Government wouldn't hear of it."

"What *is* in there, then?"

"A machine based on the principle of the Imagitoys. Haven't you read the ads: 'Let Your Child take his Vacation where He Wants to Take it; Buy Him an Imagi-toy?'"

"Those things? Sure, I've heard of 'em. You mean . . . ?"

Packer nodded. "I only thought of it when I was up at the Imagitoy Center buying one for my kid. They're pretty wonderful things, you know. Your own thoughts and desires are caught on mentabeams and relayed straight back at you, instantaneously, as solid, three dimensional images complete in every detail: They are hallucinations, of course, in the Imagitoy proper, but tangible, audible, and incredibly real hallucinations nevertheless. It took a bit of time to persuade the Government to give their permission, but they agreed in the end. Thought it would be the best thing for him, I guess, same as the rest of us did."

"You said that this thing in there was based on the Imagitoy, didn't you?" the truck driver enquired, frowning.

"I did, yes. We used the Imagitoy principle to create the mentabeam pattern of Gibson's thoughts, but from that we build the hallucination into actual reality by using the matter duplication principle."

"Huh?" The truck driver blinked.

"Well, you know that the Shnelling-Martins formulae can be used to break all matter down into energy patterns which can be transmitted from one point to another and then reassembled once more?"

"The transmitter units, you mean? Yes, I know about them, but this business of making hallucinations into realities . . ."

"The same principle is used. The mentabeams give us the nature of the object direct from Gibson's own mind. That information is communicated to an electronic microlibrary which gives the necessary Shnelling-Martins energy wave pattern and that, in turn, is fed to the duplicator which, in this instance, is used simply to create matter from the wave pattern, not to re-create or reassemble it out of wave patterns that are themselves the results of a matter-energy breakdown.

"Inside that building, now," he went on, turning to look at it once more, "Gibson will step into the room imagining that he is stepping back into his own world, and that is what he will be doing, in effect. He'll be stepping into a specially created reality; and an almost perfect reality, too, since he'll remember and project the good things about his past life. The only setbacks he'll have will be those dictated by his subconscious through a sense of compensation."

"But what about the question of space in that place?" the driver exclaimed, perplexed. "If the guy's going to live out his life within that building there'll come a time when the created objects will squeeze him up through the roof, won't there?"

Packer shook his head. "No," he said. "When Gibson turns his thoughts away from something it is immediately dissembled into energy wave patterns; these are recorded in case he wants to see or handle that exact object again, and then they are fed back as raw energy into the creator unit once again."

“Don’t you think it would have been simpler just to send him back in time through a temporal displacer?”

Packer shook his head vehemently. “Not on your life. Our research teams that have been investigating the various problems of time travel and temporal paradox are very strict on that kind of thing. They’ve proved, statistically and definitely, that vast changes could be made to our present by even the slightest of alterations in the past. Recorded history tells us that Gibson did not return from his trip into the future and we can’t play around with recorded history.”

“But if we did . . .”

“. . . If we did send Gibson back? I hate to think of it. He’d know about us, about our civilization, about our being more than man. And he’d tell someone about it, eventually.”

“So what?”

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Packer moved his hands in the air. “So all sorts of things. History tells us that the imminent atomic war of 1970 was averted through the actions of one of our own race—one of the very first homo superiors. Supposing the man Gibson told about us didn’t like the idea of creatures who were superior to men? Suppose he sought out the first of us? Suppose the man and the woman from whom our race descended were killed, in some way, before they could bear children? Suppose the atomic war had not been averted?” He smiled a little grimly and waved at the buildings, at the street, at the men who were installing the force field projector that would cut off Mr. Fletcher Gibson forever and forever, as long as he lived, from the real and genuine twenty-fourth century world. “All this,” he went on quietly, “might never exist, if our friend Gibson got back to his own period in time.”

Six seconds later there came final, conclusive and very terrible proof of Mr. Packer’s words, of his theory.

But Mr. Packer, of course, was not there to witness it. Nor was the driver of the turbotruck, nor the truck itself, nor the houses, streets, buildings, force field projector. . . . Nor, in fact, was anything there to witness the miraculous proof. Nothing living moved over the vast, baked, blistered desertland and the only sound in that solemn emptiness was that of a red dust wind that keened its way in lamentation and was heard by not a single ear.

For Mr. Packer and his friends, you see, made one bad error. One very regrettable error. One unfortunately irrevocable error.

They had assumed that Gibson would step into his study expecting to find himself in his own world once more, transported there, instantly, by a temporal displacement field surrounding the room.

But Gibson did not do exactly that. His acceptance of Packer’s statement that the room itself was the time machine was but a surface acceptance. Subconsciously he expected to find, when he entered the study, some form of machine that he could recognize as being somewhat similar to that which he had entered before.

And find it he did. Naturally.

“Time Machine,” said his mind.

“Time Machine,” relayed the mentabeam, swiftly, to the microlibrary.

“Time Machine,” the microlibrary assented, searching within itself for the necessary data, the respective wave-energy patterns, its complex electronic brain cells working on this difficult problem at incredible speeds, feeding the patterns down into the intricate channel nerves of the matter creator unit which, triumphantly yet almost without exerting itself,

announced soundlessly to the waiting man: "TIME MACHINE!" The machine was in the center of the room.

Gibson nodded to himself when he saw it, recognizing it as an advancement on the one he had entered before, but recognizing it, nevertheless.

He did not step into it right away. Instead he turned and tried to open the door, intending to go out and ask Packer why he had told him that the room itself was the time machine. But the door was locked and no sound came from without. No sound at all.

"Perhaps Packer never got permission to send me back at all," he said to himself. "Perhaps that's why he wanted to get me inside here as soon as possible. I'd better ask him about that." He pounded on the door while—

While outside, Packer was talking to the turbotruck driver about the Imagitoys.

The door wouldn't move and Packer didn't answer. Gibson turned his attention to the cage-like silvered shape of the time machine, walking round it. The machine itself, he knew, merely served as a confinement for the temporal displacement waves; it would not return with him but would merely serve as the gun from which he himself, the bullet, would be shot. He stood thinking this while—

While Packer described the possible effects of tampering with the past.

"Well," said Mr. Fletcher Gibson, stepping at last into the temporal displacer, "1954—here I come!"

And with that swift and apparently inconsequential movement the twenty-first, twenty-second, twenty-third and twenty-fourth century civilizations were removed, deftly, from the planet Earth.

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All of a sudden, as if from nowhere, (or as if from some magician's gigantic but invisible hat) Gibson appeared, blinking and touching himself to make sure he was really there. He pinched himself tentatively and it hurt. He *was* really there! The sun was warming. The trees were fine and old and green and just as they had been. And it was only three minutes walk from his own home. . . .

[The end of *The Toy* by Bryan Berry]