

# The Laughing Stock

**October 8, 1858**

I have just come from our monthly society meeting at the Royal. Richard Prince had finished a detailed lecture on the design of the ingenious Roman aqueducts, though I confess when he quoted at length from Vitruvius' Latin works on the subject I found myself wool-gathering for some long moments. Captain Hickson was there, and during the ensuing discussion, commented on the strategic advantages of the underground waterways during the Third Samnite War. I had wanted to engage him on this matter, as the provision of good water has strong merit in its own right, but I held my tongue.

"But perhaps," the Captain said, turning in his chair towards me, "Hess here might enlighten us with his first-hand observations of these architectural wonders, having witnessed their construction using only the energy of a maiden's sigh."

Prince cleared his throat and others elsewhere in the room looked our way.

"Well played, sir," I responded. "I am chastened in my enthusiasms of last month. I can but blame the burgundy for my flight of fancy."

"Indeed," said the Captain. "You were most convincing in your conviction and calculation when last we met. Perhaps you would like to indulge in a bit of humble pie this evening?"

"I shall, with apologies," I responded. "And now that the topic has changed from water to wine, perhaps I shall wash it down with some of the house's fine port, gentlemen."

So I begin, letting Hickson's thrusts hit home, playing the public laughing stock, though every fibre of my nature fights against the necessary pretense.

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# My Mentor Witnesses The First Test

**March 12, 1860**

The calico cat paid us no heed as it lapped milk from a saucer I had placed on the floor of my stable cum laboratory. Mindless beast that it was, it was unaware of the place it would soon take in the history of science. For a week now, Angus and I had been testing his latest prototype – devoid of passenger. We had shifted the empty capsule a few feet back and forth across the stable floor with jolts of electricity released from the voltaic piles we had stacked in wired columns along one wall. We worked alone and in secret, often at night, our lights and sudden flashes hidden from the world by dark curtains we strung up over the stable's small windows. Tonight, however, I had invited my mentor Dr. MacDonald to observe. I had been giving my loyal friend updates on my progress since that night almost two years ago now, when I had confessed how close I was to turning my theory into practice. In all that time my mentor had not asked to see my laboratory. Now he paced it, ubiquitous cigar in a hand behind his back.

"This is your dynamo," he said, pointing to a large cast iron device we had bolted deep into the floor of the stable. "And this your commutator, for generating direct current?" He pointed to the heart of the electric marvel with his cigar.

"Just so!" I said proudly. "It is powered via the steam from the boilers," I added, pointing to a black cylinder throwing off prodigious heat. "I have adapted these voltaic piles to store a great deal of electrical energy, then release it in an instant!" I showed him a length of wire running from the piles to the Chronocycle. "The electric force is like that of a lightning strike!"

MacDonald, a kind soul, bent over and stroked the calico behind its ears. "And this fine fellow will be our chrononaut?"

"A brave new word!" I exclaimed. "I shall note the neologism as your own in my journal, sir."

MacDonald stood upright and then bowed slightly. "The floor is yours gentlemen."

Angus picked up the cat and lowered it gently into a metal tray he had welded to the small Chronocycle. We placed the device at the east end of the stable and had set the controls to shift it five yards to the west. There, on the floor, Angus had placed a black wooden box, barely an inch larger than the Chronocycle on all sides.

"Best don these glasses," I said to MacDonald as I handed him a pair of blue spectacles with tinted sidelights. Angus and I each put on a pair of our own.

"Whenever you're ready, Mr. Ambrose," I said and encouraged MacDonald to step back a few

paces with me. Angus walked over to the nearby control panel, adjusted a couple of rheostats and then pulled down on the oaken handle of a large copper switch. Green light filled the room for an instant and there was a popping sound, much like a cork leaving a champagne bottle. A tang of ozone filled our noses.

As one we removed our blue spectacles and looked out into the stable. The Chronocycle appeared to be gone! All that rested in the middle of the room was the black box. Angus stepped forward, bent down and lifted the box from the floor, revealing the Chronocycle. There was a yowl of displeasure from inside the container. The box jerked in Angus's hands as the brave chrononaut leapt free and rocketed into a corner of the room. The Chronocycle itself sat on the floor, whole and undamaged.

"Astounding, gentlemen!" MacDonald exclaimed as he pumped our hands in congratulations. "But what was that struggle with the box, and why was the cat so discomfited?"

I confessed ignorance and curiosity. Angus turned the box upside down in his free hand. On one side, a large patch of the cat's fur had embedded itself into the molecules of the wood itself. The calico had torn the hairs from its hide in the haste of its terrified escape.

"We must refine our spacial offsets," I said to Angus. "Perhaps to six decimal places." I turned to MacDonald. "The nautilus gears are not yet to the tolerances we require," I explained.

MacDonald's face darkened. "This is dangerous business indeed, Tiberius. A few more inches and the poor beast's very vitals would have been ensnared and destroyed. Death would have been either instantaneous or an agonizing few moments of horror. Even more so for a sentient being who would know the full import of such an unholy injury."

Angus met my eye then looked down.

"But, still," said MacDonald, "I am astounded by what you have achieved, sir."

"There is more," I replied, nodding to Angus.

My assistant stepped outside and returned with another cat, this one a ginger with a white diamond-shaped patch on its nose. Again Angus placed the feline in the Chronocycle. He then produced a small timepiece from his breast pocket. I extracted my own from my waistcoat, noting Adelaide's sweet face as I opened the lid. Both watches agreed it was 10 minutes past the hour of eleven. Angus placed his in the Chronocycle beneath the lazy cat and stepped over to the control panel. This time I joined him, and fit my watch into a hollow designed to hold it

snugly.

“This will establish the flow of time we experience, as if it is the conveyance’s heartbeat,” I said to MacDonald. “In turn it will magnetically engage a nautilus gear that will mesh with its fellow, which will skip along the harmonics of the time stream the Chronocycle will experience.”

“Remarkable,” exclaimed MacDonald, bending closer.

“In the final model,” said Angus, “we’ll be puttin’ all these controls right in the chronocycle, so’s the chrononaut, as you say sir, can have them handy.”

“Let us stand back,” I said and donned my glasses, as did my fellows.

Again a green flash, the pop and the acrid scent of the allotrope of oxygen.

This time the Chronocycle and its inhabitant vanished completely.

“Now we wait ten minutes,” said Angus, looking up from the controls. To pass the time, Angus proudly showed Dr. MacDonald the details of his machining and wiring. At the appointed moment we were interrupted by a pop as, right where it had been before, the Chronocycle reappeared.

Angus bent down and picked up the cat, unharmed and unconcerned. I retrieved the pocket watch and showed it to MacDonald.

“11:10!” he exclaimed. “Why, no time at all passed for the puss!” MacDonald’s face suddenly turned white. “A chair, please!” he cried out. Angus responded in an instant and I knelt beside my stricken friend. My mentor waved me away. “I’m fine, sir. I, I am just overcome with the miracle of what you have achieved.” He passed a hand over his ashen face and looked up at me. “And by the knowledge of what you plan to do next.”

