

 The Baxterium

These Things Happen

An early unpublished story by Stephen Baxter (age 16!)

As drafted 1Q 1974

©Stephen Baxter 2000

Lang was as near to excitement as he ever got. Shepard could see that. And yet there was something in the man's eyes, his manner, or something that told Shepard that Lang had another premonition coming on.

They were seated beside the chronoviewer, waiting while the technicians set the controls. Before them the reporters were fidgeting impatiently.

'Ready in a few minutes, sir,' said one of the technicians.

Shepard acknowledged that and turned back to Lang, who was biting his lip.

'What's wrong, Lang? Nervous?' Shepard knew very well he was.

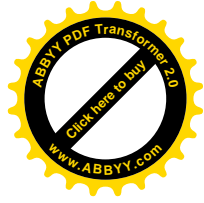
'Sort of,' said Lang, slowly. 'It's just that ... well, I've got a feeling something's going to go wrong.'

Before Shepard could say anything, Lang resumed hastily, 'Oh, I don't want to insult your engineering skills, Shepard. Far be that from me, a humble theoretician who wouldn't know how to put a portable radio together. But there's something ...' He shook his head.

'Look, Lang, nothing could go wrong. The chronoviewer's been checked and double-checked, triple-checked even. And besides, we can't back out now. Apart from the bad publicity, we'd never scrape together enough money to lease this hall again. And the electricity bills run high, too. We're up to our craniums in debt at the moment, so it's got to be now or never. But it'll work. What could go wrong?'

Lang wasn't reassured, Shepard could see that. But then one of the technicians told him that all was ready. Shepard took a drink of lime juice and stood up, his hands raised for silence.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we have asked you here today to witness the first operation of this -' he pointed to the huge metal box beside him '- which Dr



Lang and I call a chronoviewer. I won't bore you with the technical details, but basically, what it does is view the past. We can see events that happened fifty, one hundred years ago - as far back as we like. At least, I hope we can. This is the first time the chronoviewer has actually been operated.' He paused for a moment. The reporters were all scribbling furiously.

He continued. 'Unfortunately, this particular machine cannot pick up sound waves from the past, but we hope, with later models, to overcome that problem.' He began pacing slowly to and fro. Lang was fidgeting nervously.

'Dr Lang and I discussed what event we should view with the chronoviewer's first operation. Hiroshima? Lincoln's assassination? We finally decided that it would be much more use to mankind to find out -' he paused for effect '- what Einstein's last words were.'

The reporters looked at each other blankly.

'On his death bed,' explained Shepard, 'Einstein was attended by a nurse who didn't understand German. As a result, his last words were lost forever. Or rather, they were lost until today. The words may not be of any consequence, but who knows? They may constitute a new e equals $m c$ squared.

'As I have said, we cannot pick up sound waves, but we have experts here who will be able to read Einstein's lips and translate into English.' (Actually the 'expert' was Shepard's maternal grandfather who was deaf as a stone and came from Munich. As Lang said, it saved money.)

'When we have the great man's last words, I shall read them to you. Are there any questions?'

A pause.

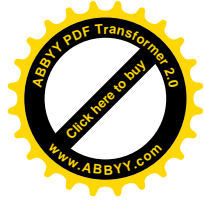
'No? Very well then, without further ado, I shall activate the chronoviewer.' He walked towards the large black button on the front of the chronoviewer. There were cries of 'Hoax!' 'Pull the other leg!' and some laughter behind him, but he ignored them. They would see, he thought. They would see.

He pressed the button.

The large screen at one end of the chronoviewer, in full view of the reporters, began to glow greyly. Soon details could be made out, although only fuzzily.

It was a rather over-decorated bedroom. A nurse was leaning over a pale old man. Shepard adjusted the controls. The fuzziness cleared somewhat and the images of the old man and the woman were enlarged until only their heads were visible.

The old man's lips could be seen moving. Then his eyes closed. The nurse put a sheet over his head.



Shepard deactivated the machine and triumphantly turned to the reporters. A babble of talking broke out. Shepard sat down beside Lang and allowed himself a sigh of relief.

'It works,' he said softly.

He looked at Lang. 'So much for your feelings,' he said.

Lang said nothing but continued gnawing his lip anxiously.

After a few minutes a note was brought to Shepard. Shepard read it, and then buried his head in his hands.

'Oh, no,' he said. 'Not that. Anything but that.'

'What's wrong? What is it, Shepard?' demanded Lang, almost hysterically.

'We were prepared for some unimportant remark by the man, but that ...' He handed Lang the note. 'And I've got to read it to them!' He swore softly.

Lang stared at him. The reporters were waiting expectantly. The talking had died down again.

Lang read the note. It ran: 'Last words: "please pass the bedpan, nurse".'

Lang vaguely wondered what the suicide rate among theoretical physicists was.

Because at that moment, he felt like boosting it a little.

[Back to Fiction Samples](#)

Copyright © 2000 S Bradshaw & S Baxter
Most recent revision August 13th, 2000