

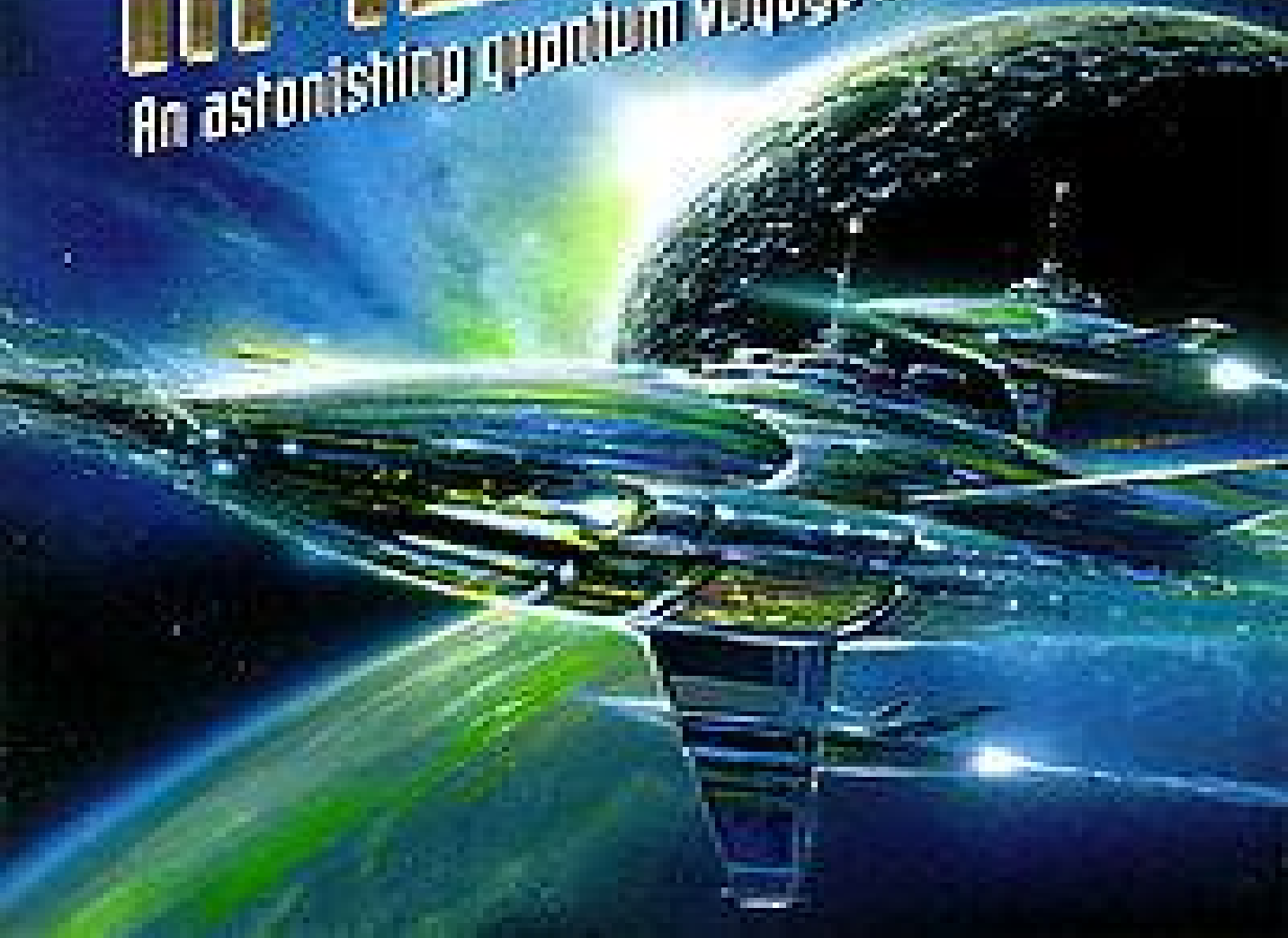
"A MAJOR NEW
TALENT!" — Arthur C. Clarke

STEPHEN BAXTER

Bestselling author of FLUX and ANTI-ICE

THE SHIPS

An astonishing quantum voyage to the far future



Annotation

A sequel to *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells, it was officially authorized by the Wells estate to mark the centenary of the original's publication.

Won:

British SF Association Award in 1995

John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best SF Novel in 1996

Philip K. Dick Award in 1996

Nominated for:

Hugo Award for Best Novel in 1996

Locus Award for Best SF Novel in 1996

Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1996

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[Epilogue](#)

Stephen Baxter
The Time Ships

To my wife Sandra, and the memory of H. G.

Editor's Note

The attached account was given to me by the owner of a small second-hand bookshop, situated just off the Charing Cross Road in London. He told me it had turned up as a manuscript in an unlabeled box, in a collection of books which had been bequeathed to him after the death of a friend; the bookseller passed the manuscript on to me as a curiosity -- "You might make something of it" -- knowing of my interest in the speculative fiction of the nineteenth century.

The manuscript itself was typewritten on commonplace paper, but a pencil note attested that it had been transcribed from an original "written by hand on a paper of such age that it has crumbled beyond repair." That original, if it ever existed, is lost. There is no note as to the manuscript's author, or origin.

I have restricted my editing to a superficial polishing, meaning only to eliminate some of the errors and duplications of a manuscript which was evidently written in haste.

What are we to make of it? In the Time Traveler's words, we must "take it as a lie -- or a prophecy... Consider I have been speculating upon the destinies of our race until I have hatched this fiction..." Without further evidence, we must regard this work as a fantasy -- or as an elaborate hoax -- but if there is even a grain of truth in the account contained in these pages, then a startling new light is shed, not merely on one of our most famous works of fiction (if fiction it was!), but also on the nature of our universe and our place in it.

I present the account here without further comment.

Stephen Baxter

January 1995

Prologue

On the Friday morning after my return from futurity, I awoke long after dawn, from the deepest of dreamless sleeps.

I got out of bed and threw back the curtains. The sun was making his usual sluggish progress up the sky, and I remembered how, from the accelerated perspective of a Time Traveler, the sun had fair hopped across heaven! But now, it seemed, I was embedded in oozing time once more, like an insect in seeping amber.

The noises of a Richmond morning gathered outside my window: the hoof-steps of horses, the rattle of wheels on cobbles, the banging of doors. A steam tram, spewing out smoke and sparks, made its clumsy way along the Petersham Road, and the gull-like cries of hawkers came floating on the air. I found my thoughts drifting away from my gaudy adventures in time and back to a mundane plane: I considered the contents of the latest Pall Mall Gazette, and stock movements, and I entertained an anticipation that the morning's post might bring the latest American Journal of Science, which would contain some speculations of mine on the findings of A. Michelson and E. Morley on certain peculiarities of light, reported in that journal four years earlier, in 1887...

And so on! The details of the everyday crowded into my head, and by contrast the memory of my adventure in futurity came to seem fantastical -- even absurd. As I thought it over now, it seemed to me that the whole experience had had something of a hallucinatory almost dreamlike quality there had been that sense of precipitate falling, the haziness of everything about time travel, and at last my plunge into the nightmarish world of A.D. 802,701. The grip of the ordinary on our imaginations is remarkable. Standing there in my pajamas, something of the uncertainty which had, in the end, assailed me last night returned, and I started to doubt the very existence of the Time Machine itself -- despite my very clear memories of the two years of my life I had expended in the nuts and bolts of its construction, not to mention the two decades previous, during which I had teased out the theory of time travel from anomalies I had observed during my studies of physical optics.

I thought back to my conversation with my companions over dinner the evening before -- somehow those few hours were far more vivid, now, than all the days I had spent in that world of futurity -- and I remembered their mix of responses to my account: there had been a general enjoyment of a good tale, accompanied by dashes of sympathy or near-derision depending on the temperaments of individuals -- and, I recalled, a near-universal skepticism. Only one good friend, who I shall call the Writer in these pages, had seemed to listen to my ramblings with any degree of sympathy and trust.

Standing by the window, I stretched -- and my doubts about my memories took a jolt! The ache of my back was real enough, acute and urgent, as were the burning sensations in the muscles of my legs and arms: protests from the muscles of a no-longer young man forced, against his practice, to exert himself. "Well, then," I argued with myself, "if your trip into the future was truly a dream -- all of it, including that bleak night when you fought the Morlocks in the forest -- where have these aches and pains come from? Have you been capering around your garden, perhaps, in a moonstruck delirium?"

And there, dumped without ceremony in a corner of my room, I saw a small heap of clothes: they were the garments I had worn to their ruin during my flight to the future, and which now were fit only to be destroyed. I could see grass stains and scorch marks; the pockets were torn, and I remembered how Weena had used those flaps of cloth as impromptu vases, to load up with the etiolated flowers of the future. My shoes were missing, of course -- I felt an odd twinge of regret for the comfortable old house-shoes which I had borne unthinking into a hostile future, before abandoning them to an unimaginable fate! -- and there, on the carpet, were the filthy, bloodstained remnants of my socks.

Somehow it was those socks -- those comical, battered old socks! -- whose rude existence convinced me, above anything else, that I was not yet insane: that my flight into the future had not been entirely a dream.

I must return to time, I saw; I must gather evidence that futurity was as real as the Richmond of 1891, to convince my circle of friends and my peers in my scientific endeavors -- and to banish the last traces of my own self-doubt.

As I formed this resolve, suddenly I saw the sweet, empty face of Weena, as vivid as if she had been standing there before me. Sadness, and a

surge of guilt at my own impetuosity, tore at my heart. Weena, the Eloi child-woman, had followed me to the Palace of Green Porcelain through the depths of the resurgent forest of that distant Thames valley, and had been lost in the confusion of the subsequent fire, and the bleak assaults of the Morlocks. I have always been a man to act first and allow my rational brain to catch up later! In my bachelor life, this tendency had never yet led anyone into serious danger except myself -- but now, in my thoughtlessness and headlong rush, I had abandoned poor, trusting Weena to a grisly death in the shadows of that Dark Night of the Morlocks.

I had blood on my hands, and not just the ichor of those foul, degraded submen, the Morlocks. I determined I must make recompense -- in whatever way I could -- for my abominable treatment of poor, trusting Weena.

I was filled with resolve. My adventures, physical and intellectual, were not done yet!

I had Mrs. Watchets run me a bath, and I clambered into it. Despite my mood of urgency, I took time to pamper my poor, battered bones; I noted with interest the blistered and scarred state of my feet, and the mild burns I had suffered to my hands.

I dressed quickly. Mrs. Watchets prepared me breakfast. I dug into my eggs, mushrooms and tomatoes with vigor -- and yet I found the bacon and sausages lying heavy in my mouth; when I bit into the thick meat, its juices, full of salt and oil, filled me with a faint disgust.

I could not help but remember the Morlocks, and the meat I had seen them consume at their foul repasts! My experiences had not dulled my appetite for mutton at dinner the previous evening, I recalled, but then my hunger had been so much greater. Could it be that a certain shock and disquietude, unraveling from my misadventures, were even now working through the layers of my mind?

But a full breakfast is my custom; for I believe that a good dose of peptone in the arteries early in the day is essential for the efficient operation of the vigorous, human machine. And today could become as demanding a day as I had faced in my life. Therefore I put aside my qualms, and finished my plate, chewing through my bacon with determination.

Breakfast over, I donned a light but serviceable summer suit. As I think I mentioned to my companions at dinner the previous evening, it had