

The Mystery of Time

Characters :

PAST.

PRESENT.

FUTURE

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THE PRESENT is seated on a throne a man in the prime of life, his eyes closed. He is sitting rigidly as if in a trance. He is dressed in white.

THE PAST, an old man in black with a skull cap: of a grotesque appearance and voice. He is guarding the door on the Present's left.

THE FUTURE, a beautiful boy in a dress of the colour of the dawn with an iridescent cloak of gossamer. He is on the right guarding another door.

THE PAST and FUTURE look at each other cautiously, nod, and creep quietly across the stage; they meet to the left front of the throne and talk as if they were afraid of being overheard.

Future. What will come of it, do you think?

Past. There is danger for us: I've always found it most unpleasant.

Future. How is that?

Past (in the piping voice of the old). I am sorry to tell you, my amiable young friend, that in my experience, when our master sits too long upon that throne which he calls The Place of Truth—it is very grievous—but I am obliged to confess that we are apt to become totally extinct.

Future. But I will not, I will not fade and fade until I die. (*Past shrugs his shoulders*). How can we resist? Surely you can think of something to do?

Past (slowly). All we can do is to try and break in upon his reverie.

Future. Go on! go on!

Past. I have tried my utmost.

Future. Try again.

Past. I have tried all ways.

Future. But why are you so powerless?

Past. Look. I will tell you our secret. The truth is, you and I have no Reality. We are ever-changing phantoms.

Future. And Reality is a treasure that he, our master, holds?

Past. Yes, but he does not know it. He must never know it, or we die.

Future. Oh, Misery!

Past. Unless we keep his fancy dancing to our measure, he'll find it out at last and we shall disappear.

Future. But has he never found it out before?

Past. Never completely. He strives after something he calls the mystery of being for a while, and we hide ourselves and wait until he grows a little weary of beatitude. With delicate feet Doubt enters his mind, and we sprang out once more to trouble his ageless peace.

Future. Where is this mighty Spirit of Doubt that I may call her?

Past. Alas! we have no power to call her.

Future. Why not? Have we not power unlimited in every place but this?

Past. Doubt is the mother of phantoms; she brought us forth and everything we see and know sprang from her great wonder. But we call to her in vain. She comes like the storm at her own will.

Future. Oh, see how fixed in trance he is!

Past. Firm as the loadstone of the world.

Future (seized with the cramp). Oh! oh! I feel myself drawn to his feet. Agony! agony! Save me! save me!

Past. Alas! alas! I have tried all my magic; my wisdom and my arts are nothing to him.

Future. You must do something or I shall die and you'll die too, old dotard—don't forget yourself.

Past (sniggers). No fear of that, no fear I shall forget myself.

Future. Oh, all my beauty vanishes!

Past. I have shown him glimpses of misleading wisdom, strange joys, forgotten mysteries. I have given him a taste of praise, of rapture and swift movement.

Future. Of rapture! What do you know of rapture, poor old fool? Leave that to me. If that will win us life, I'll make him feel the keen edge of joy. I'll make him feel the honey in his veins and the loud heartbeats that silence wisdom.

Past. All these are fires he has known, my hands have scattered their ashes many times.

Future. O shrivelled hands, what fire have you to give? It is not withered memory that tempts, nor aching limbs that make

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men long for life (*holds out his own beautiful hands*). The magic fire I give shall work new changes on him.

Past. Your fires will be mine before an hour has past; even now they pass into my veins.

Future (in a fury). Old hog! get out of my sight. I hate your dreary lies. I am the source of life; 'tis you must die.

Past (bows mockingly). Resplendent youth, your dreams would die untold if it were not for me. The law is this, it is the law of Time. And you are going where you must, and dreaming once again the fair false dreams I wrote of ages since.

Future. I know your cry, "reiteration" and "recurrence," your "ring of Time." But I defy it! I'll bring him new dreams. Titanic, Godlike dreams, dreams of power, dreams that he moves the very pulse of earth.

Past. What are your dreams? My hands long since have torn those dreams in fragments.

Future. He has never yet dreamed of conquering the earth, the sea, the air.

Past. Poor child, you are bewildered. I tell you he has been king of air and water and of fire itself: in the past before this earth was battered into shape the spirit that now breathes in him was free; it knew no power that could keep it back. The fire was a rapture and the air a whirl of light. No solid earth shut out the quick ecstasy of beings who are now men blinded behind a little veil of flesh—and wondering at their helplessness.

Future. Strange, strange that was beyond my thought.

Past. You'll think it yet when we have travelled round the ring of time.

Future. Alas! alas!

Past. Try something simpler.

Future. What can I do?

Past. I have-love songs in my bag here; sing them to him.

Future. Yes, yes, a maid.

Past. A cup of wine.

Both. These are enough.

Past. They'll set him dreaming and desiring, grasping, fighting, killing, raging to defend his own.

(The Future sings some old poems in praise of love.)

Future. These should soon rouse him from his trance.

Past. Now try a Dionysian strain and praise the grape and dance the Bacchic dance.

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(They dance and sing until the Present slowly opens his eyes, and they return to their stations on either side of the throne.)

Present. What is this whirl of sense that clouds the serene ecstasy of being, that I knew but now when I cast away the images of thought and pierced my heart to find its secret home? (dreamily) I stood naked in a dark and bleak eternity and filled it with my exultation.

Past. Master, we wait for you.

Present. Old man, old man, wait on; for I have known the rapture which delights in destroying its very being. I have scattered the broken lights of day and live in a silent place where time and change are dumb.

Past. We have great feasts for you, my master, and kegs of wine from Cyprus.

Present. I do not need to feast, my body is a phantom made of thought (they shrink back shuddering). I will not feed it, for it grows and creeps about me holding delight to my eyes and horror to the deep joy that gleams within my heart. (Past weeps.) Do not weep so, but tell me did men of old listen to their own hearts and learn from them what nothing else could tell?

Past. Yes, yes, indeed, dear master, if you will but come away from this dread place I can show you the scripts of the wisest among them.

Present. Bring them here.

Past. I fear there are very few I could bring here. The Central Truth casts a bewilderment upon men's thoughts.

Present. Bring what you can.

Past. One short passage from St Augustine (as he opens his bag). Two or three from the Greeks. One poem from Persia. One inscription from Egypt. Three sentences from Sancharachaya and from the Tao—

Present. Enough, enough; show me the most ancient of them all.

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our hearts, if you had not disturbed us with your foolish wench, he would soon have been beguiled.

Future. I believe in the wench. She's a great power. What is a bit of fine writing to us when the passions rage?

Past. And where would passions be if men had not fired them with thought, and peopled them with images of joy?

Future. Oh words! words! They are nothing!

Past. A word once flashed across the bosom of the depths, and all the stars of heaven sprang out to listen to it.

Future. That was because the word was full of desire for the stars.

Past. Maybe; but what is a man or woman that they should be desired? It is the dreams and images of poets and singers that has made a mantle of sweet sounds and cast it over them so that their passions may bring them an unearthly joy.

Future. Oh that I might lead her in, that he might see her loveliness!

Past. The wild words of the singers have made you see enchantment in her breath, a thunder cloud in her hair. He knows, he knows, that she is nothing but a carcase like any other beast.

Future. Horrible old man, away with you! (*Pursues and batters the old fellow, who takes refuge on a high place whence he looks down like a gargoyle.*) Oh, great master, awake, and save me from this old devourer!

Present. You have but to know yourself as one with me and death can never touch you.

Future. I love you, I love you, but I cannot hold your hand, I cannot know you. I am a delight, a rapture beyond, always beyond —.

Present. I see a strange light trembling round your hair in tender rainbow tints.

Future. Oh Master, turn your terrible eyes away. They blaze and burn up all my fancies in their light. I would not die.

Voice outside chants with a terrible wail. I am lost, I am lost. Thousands of years I must wander 'mid phantoms of time.

Future. Listen to the cry of her you will not save. It is the cry of the whole world. It is the cry of the unmeasured hosts of souls. If you would go to them and rule them, the fair soul of earth would lay her head upon your heart and hang her lovely

arms about your neck and sing songs of your noble deeds to all things.

Present. There is no need for me. There is within them all a secret shrine of blessedness.

Future. But man is born to make a beautiful thing of Sorrow. He does not care for Happiness.

Present. He can do little till he has burned with the supreme desire, his brief madness can but accomplish brief allayments.

Future. Oh, go and prophesy upon the housetops, Greatest of Beings. This one woman saved, means that the world would burn with rapture.

Present. Child! child! know this riddle and ponder it. The supreme desire is to be without the supreme desire. That I have known.

Future (in agony at seeing the Present once more lapse into trance). Master, master, wait, wait till we are old. I am so young.

Present (speaking with a far-off voice). Seek the imperishable while the tides of life are in the flood. Then they can carry you beyond all mortal hope. For those who wait for the dark time of feeble will can only sink and drown.

Future. I have lost hope.

Present. Then give me your hand.

Future. I give it. *(As he does so he becomes transfigured with joy).* Oh Time! Time! you are slain in the unchanging rapture of truth.

Past (leaps down with a scream, a wail of wild music is heard). Come away, come away, we shall die, we shall die.

Present (to the Future). The old ways of the changing world cry to you. Can you master them?

Future. Oh Truth, great virgin, that melts down life and death and gives us them to drink out of your cup!

Past. Who cares for Truth? come away, come away, or we die. *(He drags the Future away and leaves him fainting at the foot of the throne.)*

Present. Now are you glad at heart, poor hungerers for harvest, thirsters after life?

Past. Come away from this dreadful place. See, see,

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great master, how it has killed this child; he was so full of joy and life.

Present. He is a phantom. You are a phantom. Let all phantoms know themselves as phantoms, and the goal is reached.

Past. Is the goal Truth?

Present. She is burned up in Being. The Gods may labour in the fields of Time but I remain. The ten winds may sweep through Space, but the dust returns to its own place.

Past and Future. The dust, the dust, what is this mystery?

Present. The smallest of the small is the greatest of the great.

Past. Is that the last word?

Present. The last word is NOW.

Future (kneels). Oh, let me die!

Past. You are the master in the Place of Being, and Time must be the servant at your gate (*kneels*).

Present. Where I am, none are servants. All life is mine; all possession is a burden, for I see Time as it is without fear. (*He gently raises them to their feet.*)

FLORENCE FARR