

ENGLISH



THE THIRD LEVEL

~Summary~

-by Jack Finney

Three Levels at the Grand Central Railway Station

The narrator feels that there are three levels at the Grand Central Railway Station. In reality, there are only two. He has discussed this with his psychiatrist friend, Sam Weiner. Sam feels that the narrator's experience is a waking-dream wish fulfilment. The psychiatrist says that he (the narrator) is unhappy and the modern man is engulfed in insecurities and fears. So, man wants an escape from his stressful life.

Narrator's Hobby of Stamp Collection; A Refuge

The narrator's psychiatrist friend says that the narrator's hobby of stamp collection is a 'temporary refuge from reality.' The narrator does not agree with this interpretation. He argues that his grandfather lived in 'nice and peaceful times and if this was the case his grandfather did not need to run away from reality. Still his grandfather pursued philately (the collection and study of postage stamps).

Charley Reaches 'The Third Level

One summer night Charley worked late at the office. In a hurry to get back home, he decided to take the subway from Grand Central. He crossed the arched doorway heading for the subway and got lost. The narrator strongly feels that the Grand Central grows like a tree and pushes out new corridors and stairs like roots. The narrator walks down a corridor. He finds nobody but hears empty sound of his own foot steps. He founds himself at the third level at Grand Central Station!

Scenario at 'The Third Level

There were smaller rooms, fewer ticket windows and open-flame gaslights there. The information booth was made of wood and was looking ancient. Everybody at the station was dressed in the fashion of the late 19th century. To be sure, the narrator got a copy of 'The World' dated June 11, 1899 where the lead story was about President Cleveland.

The narrator goes to the ticket window and demands two tickets for Galesburg, Illinois. He wants to go there with his wife, Louisa. He imagines it to be a peaceful countryside in the year 1894 when the First World War was twenty years away and the Second World War was forty years

away. To his surprise, the clerk at the ticket counter does not accept his currency bills. Sensing trouble, the narrator runs away from the third level to escape jail.

Charley Buys Old Currency

The narrator withdraws three hundred dollars from the bank next day to buy the currency of 1890. His psychiatrist friend is really worried over this. However, his three hundred dollars got reduced to two hundred in old-style bills. He doesn't care because he desperately wants to reach the third level.

Quest for 'The Third Level'

The narrator fails to find the third level again. His wife is very worried and pursues Charley to stop looking for the third level. So, he resumes his hobby of stamp collection. His psychiatrist friend, Sam disappears and the narrator and his wife get proof of the existence of the third level. Now both of them start their futile search for the third level platform. The narrator believes the Sam is now in Galesburg in the year 1894.

The Mystery of First-day Covers

When a new stamp is issued, stamp collectors buy it and affix a new stamp on an envelope. They mail the envelope to themselves on the first day of the sale. The postman gives proof of the date. The envelope is never opened and nothing is written inside it. This is called first day cover.

While finicking with his stamp collection, the narrator finds a strange cover mailed to the narrator's grandfather's address in Galesburg. It has been present there since July 18, 1894. It bears a six cent stamp with the picture of President Garfield. The envelope contains a letter for Charley by his friend Sam. Sam confirms the presence of the third level and advises the narrator to keep looking for it. He says 'It's worth it.'

Narrator's Reality Check on Sam

Charley finds out that Sam had bought eight hundred dollars worth of old-style currency. This money was sufficient to set up a hay, feed and grain business which Sam dreamt of. Sam is a qualified psychiatrist but cannot go back to his profession in Galesburg of 1894 because the profession of psychiatrist did not exist at that time.