

By His Bootstraps

By Robert A. Heinlein

[from: <http://www.heinleinsociety.org/rah/works/shortstories/byhisbootstraps.html>]

In the far future, a very advanced alien race comes to Earth, rules for thousands of years and then for unknown reasons disappears leaving behind an artifact which provides a means to travel in time.

Bob Wilson, a Ph.D. candidate struggling in a last-minute effort to complete his dissertation before the deadline for submission has locked himself in his room working at the typewriter when a stranger joins him. The stranger promises Bob a great future if he will return with the stranger through the "gate" by which he had arrived. Bob, confused by all of this starts drinking and before long is quite drunk. He has made up his mind to do as the stranger asks when a second stranger appears through the gate and tries to prevent this from happening. As they are arguing, Bob receives what appears to be a crank call. Afterwards, a scuffle ensues and Bob is knocked through the gate.

When he regains consciousness, a middle-aged man named Diktor greets him, leads him to a room, treats his wounds and gives him a drink that puts him to sleep. Awaking after a day and a half, he meets with the man again who explains that they are 30,000 years in the future. Bob recognizes that Diktor is also a visitor from the 20th century. He asks Bob to return to his room through the gate, pick up some items and persuade the person he finds there to return with him and they would all enjoy a great future together.

Bob goes through the gate and is immediately shocked when he realizes that he is the "stranger" who has returned to see himself working there on his thesis. He tries to do things differently than that which he remembers from his earlier experience, but is unable to say or do anything different. He has about convinced his "earlier" self to go through the gate when the scene repeats itself with the advent of the second stranger. He experiences more shock when he realizes that this stranger is another copy of himself.

After the earlier Bob has been knocked through the gate, he argues with his later self and then goes back through the gate where he confronts Diktor. Bob argues with him and decides to get off of the merry-go-round by going back through the gate to his own time.

This time he realizes that he has become the second stranger. The scene repeats with well-worn familiarity and he is left alone after the first Bob is knocked through the gate and the second Bob has left also.

At this point, he considers that he is finished with this nonsense, but, the gate is still there and the prospect of living a dull academic life pales in comparison with the potentials he saw in the future. He decides to take matters into his own hands and goes through the gate once more. He finds the list of items that he was supposed to retrieve, resets the controls and returns to his own time although at an earlier hour. Having gotten all of the items on the list, he makes a phone call to his own apartment to check that all is going as he remembered it. Remember the "crank phone call"?

He returns to his room after all of the previous events have transpired and goes through the gate again. This time he resets the controls to 10 years in the

past and returns there. His idea is to take over the place and preempt the status of the older man before he can arrive.

10 Years pass and the man never shows up. One day when he is examining the gate, he sets it to appear in his old room in his old time. Guess who arrives unconscious after having been knocked through the gate and guess who he now knows that he himself is?

The cycle of events from the later side of the gate play themselves out just as he remembered them with all of the Bobs going and coming just as before only now he is doing the part of the older man.

Having entered the set of cycles when he was writing his dissertation, he now exits from the cycles after all of the Bobs have come and gone and acted out their parts.

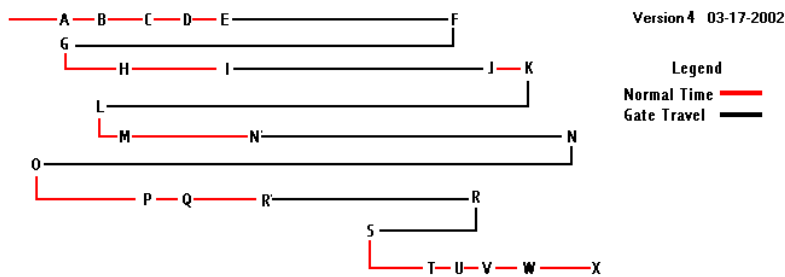
Bob Wilson is a very unlikable character to many people. He appears to be a completely self-centered person and as a consequence is one of the few Heinlein main characters who treat women in a less than gentlemanly fashion and one who could easily have become a mediocre and alcoholic professor had it not been for his subsequent fate. He has no qualms about bouncing checks which he knows will never be covered. Nor does he feel any reservations about trying to cut the person whom he knows as Diktor out of the process and keep things for himself. When you get right down to it, Bob's really not a very nice guy.

This story along with "All You Zombies" and "The Door Into Summer" are examples of what are called "deterministic" or "unchangeable timeline" stories. In other words, All of the events take place on time loops, but there is no change in what happens each time through the loop. Events are "fixed". One philosophical problem associated with this kind of story is obvious. What happens to "free will"? In this story Heinlein attempts to answer that question with a bit of hand-waving

by talking about how events are "free" from within the timeline, but "fixed" from a higher dimensional viewpoint. He also invokes this idea of higher dimensions, apparently based on J.W. Dunne's theories, and does try to use them to provide a "scientific" basis for his time traveling.

Such "fixed events" are not the

norm in most of his later works where he gets into all sorts of variations, multiple timelines, the changing of events through time travel and even the changing of events through direct author interaction with the story as in the "erasing" of



- A = Bob(1) meets Bob(2) arriving from future G
 - B = Bob(1) meets Bob(3) arriving from future L
 - C = Bob(1) gets phone call from Bob(4) P
 - D = Genevieve meets with Bob(4) Q
 - E = Bob(1) gets knocked thru gate by Bob(4) I
 - F = Bob(1) meets Diktor U
 - G = Bob(1) becomes Bob(2) meets Bob(1) A
 - H = Bob(2) is confronted by Bob(3) M
 - I = Bob(2) knocks Bob(1) through gate E
 - J = Bob(2) goes thru gate, meets Diktor V
 - K = Bob(2) confronts Diktor W
 - L = Bob(2) in 1952 becomes Bob(3), meets Bob(1) B
 - M = Bob(3) confronts Bob(2) H
 - N = Bob(3) returns to future
 - O = Bob(3) returns to 1952 in early afternoon becoming Bob(4)
 - P = Bob(4) calls Bob(1) C
 - Q = Bob(4) meets with Genevieve D
 - R = Bob(4) returns to future thru gate in his room
 - S = Bob(4) goes back 10 years thru gate
 - T = Bob(4) lives 10 years in normal time becoming Diktor
 - U = Diktor meets Bob(1) arriving from 1952 F
 - V = Diktor meets Bob(2) arriving from 1952 J
 - W = Diktor is confronted by Bob(2) K
 - X = Diktor lives remainder of life in normal time
- Matching events in Linear Time
- A - G
 - B - L
 - C - P
 - D - Q
 - E - I
 - F - U
 - H - M
 - J - V
 - K - W

Marshall Sam Beaux in "Cat".