

THE SEVENTH VOYAGE STANISLAW LEM



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The Seventh Voyage

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Stanislaw Lem

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Stanislaw Lem

The Seventh Voyage

Translated by Michael Kandel and Louis Iribarne

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The Seventh Voyage

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It was on a Monday, April second – I was cruising in the vicinity of Betelgeuse – when a meteor no larger than a lima bean pierced the hull, shattered the drive regulator and part of the rudder, as a result of which the rocket lost all maneuverability. I put on my spacesuit, went outside and tried to fix the mechanism, but found I couldn't possibly attach the spare rudder – which I'd had the foresight to bring along – without the help of another man. The constructors had foolishly designed the rocket in such a way, that it took one person to hold the head of the bolt in place with a wrench, and another to tighten the nut. I didn't realize this at first and spent several hours trying to grip the wrench with my feet while using both hands to screw on the nut at the other end. But I was getting nowhere, and had already missed lunch. Then finally, just as I almost succeeded, the wrench popped out from under my feet and went flying off into space. So not only had I accomplished nothing, but lost a valuable tool besides; I watched helplessly as it sailed away, growing smaller and smaller against the starry sky.

After a while the wrench returned in an elongated ellipse, but though it had now become a satellite of the rocket, it never got close enough for me to retrieve it.

I went back inside and, sitting down to a modest supper, considered how best to extricate myself from this stupid situation. Meanwhile the ship flew on, straight ahead, its velocity steadily increasing, since my drive regulator too had been knocked out by that blasted meteor. It's true there were no heavenly bodies on course, but this head-long flight could hardly continue indefinitely. For a while I contained my anger, but then discovered, when starting to wash the dinner dishes, that the now-overheated atomic pile had ruined my very best cut of sirloin (I'd been keeping it in the freezer for Sunday). I momentarily lost my usually level head, burst into a volley of the vilest oaths and smashed a few plates. This did give me a certain satisfaction, but was hardly practical. In addition, the sirloin which I threw overboard, instead of drifting off into the void, didn't seem to want to leave the rocket and revolved about it, a second artificial satellite, which produced a brief eclipse of the sun every eleven minutes and four seconds. To calm my nerves I calculated till evening the components of its trajectory, as well as the orbital perturbation caused by the presence of the lost wrench. I figured out that for the next six million years the sirloin, rotating about the ship in a circular path, would lead the wrench, then catch up with it from behind and pass it again. Finally, exhausted by these computations, I went to bed. In the middle of the night I had the feeling someone was shaking me by the shoulder. I opened my eyes and saw a man standing over the bed; his face was strangely familiar, though I hadn't the faintest idea who this could be.

‘Get up,’ he said, ‘and take the pliers, we’re going out and screwing on the rudder bolts . . .’

‘First of all, your manner is somewhat unceremonious, and we haven’t even been introduced,’ I replied, ‘and secondly, I know for a fact that you aren’t there. I’m alone on this rocket, and have been now for two years, en route from Earth to the constellation of the Ram. Therefore you are a dream and nothing more.’

However he continued to shake me, repeating that I should go with him at once and get the tools.

‘This is idiotic,’ I said, growing annoyed, because this dream argument could very well wake me up, and I knew from experience the difficulty I would have getting back to sleep. ‘Look, I’m not going anywhere, there’s no point in it. A bolt tightened in a dream won’t change things as they are in the sober light of day. Now kindly stop pestering me and evaporate or leave in some other fashion, otherwise I might awake.’

‘But you *are* awake, word of honor!’ cried the stubborn apparition. ‘Don’t you recognize me? Look here!’

And saying this, he pointed to the two warts, big as strawberries, on his left cheek. Instinctively I clutched my own face, for yes, I had two warts, exactly the same, and in that very place. Suddenly I realized why this phantom reminded me of someone I knew: he was the spitting image of myself.

‘Leave me alone, for heaven’s sake!’ I cried, shutting my eyes, anxious to stay asleep. ‘If you are me, then fine, we needn’t stand on ceremony, but it only proves you don’t exist!’

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With which I turned on my other side and pulled the covers up over my head. I could hear him saying something about utter nonsense; then finally, when I didn't respond, he shouted: 'You'll regret this, knucklehead! And you'll find out, too late, that this was not a dream!'

But I didn't budge. In the morning I opened my eyes and immediately recalled that curious nocturnal episode. Sitting up in bed, I thought about what strange tricks the mind can play: for here, without a single fellow creature on board and confronted with an emergency of the most pressing kind, I had – as it were – split myself in two, in that dream fantasy, to answer the needs of the situation.

After breakfast, discovering that the rocket had acquired an additional chunk of acceleration during the night, I took to leafing through the ship's library, searching the textbooks for some way out of this predicament. But I didn't find a thing. So I spread my star map out on the table and in the light of nearby Betelgeuse, obscured every so often by the orbiting sirloin, examined the area in which I was located for the seat of some cosmic civilization that might possibly come to my aid. But unfortunately this was a complete stellar wilderness, avoided by all vessels as a region unusually dangerous, for in it lay gravitational vortices, as formidable as they were mysterious, one hundred and forty-seven of them in all, whose existence was explained by six astrophysical theories, each theory saying something different.

The cosmonautical almanac warned of them, in view of the incalculable relativistic effects that passage

through a vortex could bring about – particularly when traveling at high velocities.

Yet there was little I could do. According to my calculations I would be making contact with the edge of the first vortex at around eleven, and therefore hurriedly prepared lunch, not wanting to face the danger on an empty stomach. I had barely finished drying the last saucer when the rocket began to pitch and heave in every direction, till all the objects not adequately tied down went flying from wall to wall like hail. With difficulty I crawled over to the armchair, and after I'd lashed myself to it, as the ship tossed about with ever increasing violence, I noticed a sort of pale lilac haze forming on the opposite side of the cabin, and in the middle of it, between the sink and the stove, a misty human shape, which had on an apron and was pouring omelet batter into a frying pan. The shape looked at me with interest, but without surprise, then shimmered and was gone. I rubbed my eyes. I was obviously alone, so attributed the vision to a momentary aberration.

As I continued to sit in – or rather, jump along with – the armchair, it suddenly hit me, like a dazzling revelation, that this hadn't been a hallucination at all. A thick volume of the General Theory of Relativity came whirling past my chair and I grabbed for it, finally catching it on the fourth pass. Turning the pages of that heavy tome wasn't easy under the circumstances – awesome forces hurled the rocket this way and that, it reeled like a drunken thing – but at last I found the right chapter. It spoke of the manifestation of the 'time loop,' that

is, the bending of the direction of the flow of time in the presence of gravitational fields of great intensity, which phenomenon might even on occasion lead to the complete reversal of time and the 'duplication of the present.' The vortex I had just entered was not one of the most powerful. I knew that if I could turn the ship's bow, even if only a little, towards the Galactic Pole, it would intersect the so-called Vortex Gravitatiosus Pinck-
enbachii, in which had been observed more than once the duplication, even the triplication, of the present.

True, the controls were out, but I went down to the engine room and fiddled with the instruments so long, that I actually managed to produce a slight deflection of the rocket towards the Galactic Pole. This took several hours. The results were beyond my expectations. The ship fell into the center of the vortex at around mid-
night, its girders shook and groaned until I began to fear for its safety; but it emerged from this ordeal whole and once again was wrapped in the lifeless arms of cosmic silence, whereupon I left the engine room, only to see myself sound asleep in bed. I realized at once that this was I of the previous day, that is, from Monday night. Without reflecting on the philosophical side of this rather singular event, I ran over and shook the sleeper by the shoulder, shouting for him to get up, since I had no idea how long his Monday existence would last in my Tuesday one, therefore it was imperative we go outside and fix the rudder as quickly as possible, together.

But the sleeper merely opened one eye and told me that not only was I rude but didn't exist, being a figment

of his dream and nothing more. I tugged at him in vain, losing patience, and even attempted to drag him bodily from the bed. He wouldn't budge, stubbornly repeating that it was all a dream; I began to curse, but he pointed out logically that bolts tightened in dreams wouldn't hold on rudders in the sober light of day. I gave my word of honor that he was mistaken, I pleaded and swore in turn, to no avail – even the warts did not convince him. He turned his back to me and started snoring.

I sat down in the armchair to collect my thoughts and take stock of the situation. I'd lived through it twice now, first as that sleeper, on Monday, and then as the one trying to wake him, unsuccessfully, on Tuesday. The Monday me hadn't believed in the reality of the duplication, while the Tuesday me already knew it to be a fact. Here was a perfectly ordinary time loop. What then should be done in order to get the rudder fixed? Since the Monday me slept on – I remembered that on that night I had slept through to the morning undisturbed – I saw the futility of any further efforts to rouse him. The map indicated a number of other large gravitational vortices up ahead, therefore I could count on the duplication of the present within the next few days. I decided to write myself a letter and pin it to the pillow, enabling the Monday me, when he awoke, to see for himself that the dream had been no dream.

But no sooner did I sit at the table with pen and paper than something started rattling in the engines, so I hurried there and poured water on the overheated atomic pile till dawn, while the Monday me slept soundly, licking

his lips from time to time, which galled me no end. Hungry and bleary-eyed, for I hadn't slept a wink, I set about making breakfast, and was just wiping the dishes when the rocket fell into the next gravitational vortex. I saw my Monday self staring at me dumbfounded, lashed to the armchair, while Tuesday I fried an omelet. Then a lurch knocked me off balance, everything grew dark, and down I went. I came to on the floor among bits of broken china; near my face were the shoes of a man standing over me.

'Get up,' he said, lifting me. 'Are you all right?'

'I think so,' I answered, keeping my hands on the floor, for my head was still spinning. 'From what day of the week are you?'

'Wednesday,' he said. 'Come on, let's get that rudder fixed while we have the chance!'

'But where's the Monday me?' I asked.

'Gone. Which means, I suppose, that you are he.'

'How is that?'

'Well, the Monday me on Monday night became, Tuesday morning, the Tuesday me, and so on.'

'I don't understand.'

'Doesn't matter – you'll get the hang of it. But hurry up, we're wasting time!'

'Just a minute,' I replied, remaining on the floor. 'Today is Tuesday. Now if you are the Wednesday me, and if by that time on Wednesday the rudder still hasn't been fixed, then it follows that something will prevent us from fixing it, since otherwise you, on Wednesday, would not now, on Tuesday, be asking me to help you