



SCIENCE FICTION ^K

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I. O. U.

By EDWARD WELLEN



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The Project Gutenberg EBook of Young Man from Elsewhen, by Sylvia Jacobs

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK YOUNG MAN
FROM ELSEWHEN ***

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YOUNG MAN FROM ELSEWHEN

By SYLVIA JACOBS

*One thing the old man was sure
of—there were far fewer things in
heaven and earth than were dreamt
of in his philosophy—till today.*

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A redcap was pushing a wheelchair through the station, under a ceiling so lofty that the place seemed empty, though hundreds of people were milling around, preparing to board the early trains. The old man in the wheelchair had a blanket over his knees, in spite of July heat in Los Angeles. Beside him walked a smartly dressed middle-aged woman, slimmed by diet and with her steel-gray hair looking as if she'd just stepped out of a beauty parlor. She kept up a steady stream of admonitions.

"Now, Papa," she was saying, "don't forget to take your medicine at lunchtime. Keep your chair out of the aisle—people have to walk there. And whatever you do, don't go to the club car for a drink—you know it's bad for your arthritis. The doctor said not more than three cigars a day. And if Edna isn't at the station to meet you, just wait, do you hear? It's a long drive from her house and she may be late."

"Hell's fire!" the old man protested. "I was taking trains before you were born! How my boy Will stands—"

He broke off to ogle a Mexican girl, a ripe sixteen, who was walking in the same direction, ahead of them.

"Papa! Act your age!" his daughter-in-law said under her breath.

"Like they say, a woman's as old as she looks, but a man ain't old till he quits looking," he replied absently.

The redcap grinned. The little señorita, not knowing who was watching her but quite sure someone was, paused to put a dime in a Coke machine. The wheelchair entourage passed her and the old man craned his neck, looking backward, determined not to miss anything. The girl sat down on a bench to drink her Coke. If I were only fifty years younger, the old man thought, I'd buy a Coke, too, and sit down beside her....

"Papa!" his son's wife cried. "You'll fall out of your chair! Why do you always have to embarrass me like this?" But the insistent voice could not interrupt the old man's pleasant daydream of conquest. He had turned off his hearing aid.

The redcap stopped alongside the third car of the San-Francisco-bound streamliner and signaled another redcap who was unloading a baggage truck. The other came over to help and two pairs of strong young arms lifted the old man, wheelchair and all, smoothly onto the platform of the car.

His daughter-in-law did not board the train. She stood waving, calling after the old man, "So long, Papa! Have a nice visit with Edna and remember what I told you!"

He waved back automatically, but he hadn't heard a word she said. He didn't turn his hearing aid back on until he had been wheeled inside the car.

Most of the reclining seats were already filled. The redcap pushed the wheelchair the full length of the aisle and parked it in a vacant space beyond the last seat, across from the washroom. He turned it crosswise, so it wouldn't roll when the train started moving, and with its occupant facing the window.

"Turn me around!" the old man commanded. "Like to see who I'm ridin' with. If I want to look out, I always got the opposite window."

The redcap complied, but the old man still wasn't satisfied. "Better wheel me in the club car straight off," he decided.

"Sorry, mister," the redcap said, "but you gotta ride in your own car till the conductor takes the tickets. Then you can have your train porter take you in there." That wasn't quite true. The conductor could have picked up the old man's ticket in the club car, but this way the redcap was not personally violating the orders of the lady who had given him the tip.

"Take myself in there, long as he opens the doors," the old man grumbled. But for the time being, he stayed put.

The train gave just one lurch, then picked up speed as the straggling city, then trees and suburbs and finally fields flowed past the opposite window. Now the old man felt free—for a day, at least, until his daughter Edna would take over the job supervising his every move—but at first the trip was lonely. Nobody talked to him and the only diversion in the car was a baby, which started squalling.

The old man found himself thinking how much friendlier the atmosphere was in the pool hall on Figueroa, where he rolled himself almost every day when he took his "walk" to watch the boys shoot pool. He could get there alone from his son's house, for there were driveways he could use to cross the streets, avoiding curbs. He was always welcome in the pool hall and he saw to it that he remained welcome. Every month, when his social security check came, he would buy a box of cigars and a couple of bottles and take them to the pool room, where he poured drinks for everybody until his money was used up. What else was money good for but to have a good time?

He felt more at home in that dingy place, with the walls covered with pinups, than he did in his son's modern ranch-style house. For all his daughter-in-law's fussing over him, her efforts to keep him on the diet and the medicines that were supposed to prolong his life, he knew she was glad to get rid of him for the rest of the summer. He knew because he'd heard what Jane said to her best friend, Sarah Tolliver. Jane kept track of him by the squeaking of his wheelchair, and once he had bought a can of oil at the drugstore, and oiled the wheels so they didn't make a sound as he rolled up the inclined planks Will had laid over the kitchen steps.

Sarah and Jane had been in the dining area, having coffee, and the old man turned up his hearing aid so he could hear what they were talking about from the kitchen. They were talking about him.

"You don't know how lucky you are," Sarah was saying, "that it was his legs gave out on him—not his head. When I was working at the hospital, I saw so many old folks who were just zombies, not knowing who they were, where they were, or what time it was. I tell you, there's nothing worse than that. But Will's dad? Why, he's sharp as a tack. Nobody puts anything over on him."

"He's sharp, all right," Jane agreed, "in some ways. But if he had the use of his legs, he'd be chasing after women. And that pool hall he hangs out in! When a man gets to be seventy-eight, you'd think he'd spend his time in church, not in a dive like that."

"What do you care where he goes?" Sarah asked. "At least it gives you some time to yourself."

That was it. The young folks wanted some time to themselves. It was only natural. Well, Jane would have the house to herself, with no old man underfoot for the next few months, while he was at Edna's. Edna was his own flesh and blood; she would mix him a cocktail before dinner and serve him steaks, not baby food. She would kid with him about what a Casanova he was before her ma domesticated him, and light his cigars instead of hiding the box and doling them out one by one. She would call him George instead of Papa, but it would only be an act, just to make her old father feel good because she didn't expect him to live much longer. For all the time it would be understood that he was at John and Edna's house for a visit, that the place he lived was with Will and Jane. The truth was that neither of the girls would miss him if he didn't wind up at either place.

But what a way to waste a whole golden day he had to *himself*, with neither daughter nor daughter-in-law to boss or kid him around. He had looked forward to this day as a day of adventure, a day when anything could happen, and now he was starting it off on the wrong foot, wallowing in self-pity. What he needed was a good stiff drink. Yes, at ten o'clock in the morning!

When the conductor took his ticket, the old man demanded, "Where in hell is the porter?"

It was a long train and she was hitting ninety now, and though you would not realize it in the sound-insulated, air-conditioned coaches, you did when the porter had to use his full weight to push the door open against the wind, when you heard the clackety-clack of the wheels on the rails, a fountain of noise rising up between cars, when the wheelchair swayed precariously as it was pushed across the iron treads over the couplings.

The other coaches were filled with bored passengers in various stages of somnolence, people to whom the trip was merely a means of getting somewhere else. The club car was different; this was the gathering-place of those to whom

the trip was an end in itself. It was filled with the smell of ginger ale, good whiskey and the perfume emanating from two young women at one of the small tables, periodically inspecting their makeup and hairdos in little mirrors, waiting for some nice young men to arrive.

Regretfully, the old man realized that he was not a candidate for the honor. But a few drinks would dull the twinges in his crippled legs and make him feel years younger. The white-coated waiter moved a chair, pulled the wheelchair up next to another small table and placed a paper napkin meticulously on it. The old man decided to start with a bottle of beer. Plenty of time to work up to the stronger stuff, and this way the minimum of pocket money his daughter-in-law had provided would last longer, perhaps until some free spender started buying drinks.

As it turned out, he caught his benefactor before the girls did. It was a young man of perhaps thirty-five, a dead ringer for Marshal Wyatt Earp. He went directly to the old man's table, as if he had picked him out. As a matter of fact, he had.

"May I sit here?" he asked.

"Glad to have you," the old man said, and meant it. He inspected the newcomer carefully. It would be almost too good to be true, to meet one of those actor fellows on the train. No, he decided, the clothes weren't casual enough for Hollywood; they didn't look like southern California at all. More the way he imagined an English banker would dress. Striped pants, cutaway, and a white silk scarf knotted at the throat. But an Englishman, the old man figured, would order ale instead of beer, and this one simply pointed to the old man's beer bottle when the waiter came to take his order.

"My name's George Murton," the old man said. "You can just call me George."

"Yes, indeed," the stranger agreed. "I see we shall get on famously. Mine is Sandane."

"Anybody ever tell you that you look like Wyatt Earp, Sandy?" the old man asked.

"Earp? I'm afraid I've never met the gentleman."

"Should have known. You're the bookish type. Prob'ly never watch television. Sure don't talk like a Westerner, either. You come from California or elsewhere?"

"I come from elsewhen."

Old George almost choked on a swallow of beer. Of course! That was why Sandane dressed funny, talked funny; he'd just stepped out of a time machine, like in the play last night on Channel Two. It all fitted in with the old man's feeling that this was a day for adventure. But he mustn't act too surprised; if he did, Sandane would take him for one of those old codgers who think horse-and-buggy thoughts in the jet age. A lot of younger folks, too, would say time travel was impossible, the same ones who'd called artificial satellites impossible. But George Murton had seen so many new developments in his lifetime that it was not difficult for him to accept the idea that this young man came from tomorrow.

"How long you plan to be here?" he asked casually. "Or maybe I should say—how long you plan to be here—now?"

"Not long. Just until I can get a body."

George found that remark a little confusing. It didn't belong in the script about the time machine. He felt as if he'd switched channels in the middle of the first act and tuned in on a murder mystery.

He leaned across the table and said in a low tone, "If you're figurin' on gettin' a hired gun to kill somebody, you'd better not talk about it in here. Too public."

"On the contrary, it would have to be a living body. But perhaps you're right. We could talk more freely in my compartment. Would you care to join me there, George? We could have some refreshment sent in."

"Sure would. Got a lot of questions I'd like to ask you. You see, I'm the curious type and I hang around mostly with a bunch of young punks that don't know nothin' except about the fights and the World's Series. Since my legs give out on me, I don't get around much. To tell you the truth, this is the first time I ever met a fellow from—elsewhen."

"Is it really?" Sandane said politely. "Well, then, you should find it quite interesting. What shall we have to drink?"

increasing. What shall we have to drink?

"Bourbon always suits me."

"Bourbon? One of the royal families?"

"Hell, no. You're in America, Sandy, the good old U.S.A. We don't have no royal families. Bourbon is a drink. Whiskey, *spiritus frumenti*, hard liquor."

"Fine. We shall order two flagons of it."

"Comes in fifths and you drink it in shot glasses, unless you want a mix. Rather have mine straight, with a water chaser."

"My error. I seem to have my periods mixed. Suppose you order, since you know so much more than I about the customs of your time?" The old man's happy smile suddenly faded and Sandane added hastily, "I shall pay for it, of course. It's only fitting that you should be my guest, because I believe you can be a great help to me."

This time he had hit the jackpot, the old man reflected as he was wheeled through the dining car to the first class section of the train, with a porter pushing his chair, Sandane opening the doors, and a bottle of good bourbon cradled cozily in his lap. Wait till the boys at the pool hall heard about this trip!

The first shot of bourbon warmed his stomach in the good old familiar way, and somehow that was confirmation that the rest of it was real, too.

"How come you talk the language so good?" he asked his host, after the porter left them alone in the compartment.

"Is that surprising?" Sandane asked. "It shouldn't be. I'm a student of history, in your period on a research project. Naturally, I would have to prepare myself by studying the language of the country and of the period, in order to pass as one of you."

"You do real good, Sandy, considering. But why do you want to act like ordinary folks? Seems to me you ought to go on TV and tell everybody. Bet some big news commentator would be proud to interview you."

"I'd like to see you do that, Sandy. I'd like to see you do that."

"Most people of your time would consider it a hoax."

"Maybe. But as long as you told me this much, let's have the rest of it. How does this time machine of yours work?"

"Not a machine, George. A capacity of the human mind. Dormant in your period, except for rare individuals. But in—elsewhen—we have learned how to use it. Beyond that I can give you no details. If I gave them, the method of tapping this talent would be discovered before it actually was. That is why I can't really talk with anyone about it. So I can only hint, as I did with you. If I encounter skepticism, I pass it off as a joke. This time I was lucky—I found someone who would accept it on faith. Have another?"

"Don't mind if I do. But it strikes me I'm the lucky one."

"Perhaps. You could be two thousand dollars richer as a result of having met me."

The old man paused with his shot glass halfway to his mouth and set it down again. "Well, now! I'd be glad to give you any information that would help you. I seen a lot in my life. But two thousand dollars—ain't that a mite steep?"

"Two thousand, give or take twenty—whatever I have left when we reach San Francisco. Money of this period will be of no use to me if we complete the transaction, so I may as well give you all of it. You see, the body I'd like to buy is yours."

"Hold on, now!" the old man exclaimed, propelling his chair toward the door of the compartment and fumbling for the knob. "What am I supposed to do with the money if you get my body?"

"Please don't be alarmed! It would be an exchange. You'd get the body I'm using and the money besides."

"Why in the hell didn't you say so in the first place? For trade, Sandy, you wouldn't owe me a dime. But I don't get it. Why should you trade a young, healthy body like yours for this old crippled-up one? I'd be getting all the best of it!"

"You may not think so when I tell you that this body I'm using is due to disintegrate into its component elements in about two weeks. give or take a day

or so."

"Sandy, you're just going to have to do some explaining. I still might take you up on the deal, but I got to understand what I'm getting into."

"You have a right to an explanation. And I can give it to you without revealing the actual process of the time transfer. You see, the mind is capable of an indefinite number of transfers. But a body can be used for only one. Before we overcame that obstacle, we made some serious mistakes."

"What happened?"

"It was pretty bad during the experimental trials," said Sandane. "The pioneers, who transferred in their own bodies, were stuck irrevocably in the past. To overcome that, some transferred only mentally, which meant they had to enter unbidden into a host body of the target period. The more highly trained mind naturally had more strength—the host lost his identity. What was worse, when the visitor transferred back he sometimes entered an occupied body instead of his own. When two equally strong minds contest for one body the result is insanity. And worst of all, the former host body was left mindless—alive, but how shall I say it—?"

"Like a zombie?" the old man asked. "Somebody who don't know who he is, where he is, or what time it is?"

"Yea, that's a very good description. Of course, this had to be stopped."

"You didn't stop it soon enough," the old man said dryly. "Must be a lot more of you fellows from elsewhere around than I figured."

"I assure you we don't do it any more. We grow bodies for transfer purposes in tanks. Like this one, for example."

"Well, I do declare," the old man said. "Now, that's what I call progress. According to that, when your old body wears out, you get a new one."

"We haven't achieved immortality yet. The mind has its own natural span. It is true, however, that we have a greater life expectancy, and as long as a person lives he can have a body of his choice. But let's not get off the subject. The point

is that I can't transfer back without a body, or I might get into one that's occupied. And I can't take this one with me. So I have to have one that is—well, if you'll forgive me being so blunt, more or less useless to its occupant."

"It's the truth, Sandy, and nobody knows it better than me. But the part I don't understand is why the body you're using has to fall apart in two weeks, if you leave it here."

"It is actually good for several months after the transfer. I've used up most of the time with my researches. But as to your question—surely you see why we can't leave a lot of displaced bodies cluttering up the past. The few pioneers who got stuck in previous periods were bad enough. They lived longer than anyone else of the periods, but they were taken as rare freaks of nature. If this happened on a larger scale, it would excite comment. Medical men would examine these people and find certain evolutionary developments—the secret would be out. In order to avoid that, the bodies grown artificially for transfer purposes have a built-in trigger mechanism. This also prevents anyone from over-staying his allotted leave. If I don't find a body to transfer back in within the next two weeks, I'll be dead."

"And if you do, I'll be dead," the old man said.

"I'm afraid so. Meanwhile, though, you'll have a young, healthy body to do with as you please, and some money to spend. It will happen suddenly; there will be no discomfort. I thought you looked like a man who would appreciate that. You would be cheated out of a decent funeral, however—there will be nothing resembling a body left to bury."

"Funerals!" the old man snorted. "Them as got nothing else to look forward to figure on fancy funerals. Me, I don't hanker after anything I can't be around to enjoy."

"I'm sorry I can't offer you more than two weeks, give or take a day. I was unavoidably detained."

"Can't be helped. I ain't likely to get a better offer, so I'm taking you up on it. And I admire you for an honest man. You could just as well of told me I'd have two years—or twenty. I'll do the right thing by you, too. I won't let out your secret—long as I'm sober, that is."

The young man from elsewhere smiled. "I'm not worried about that," he said, "Who would believe your unsupported statement?"

"You got a point there," the old man admitted. "Don't hardly believe it myself, till it happens. When do you do this switch business?"

"Just before we reach San Francisco, if that suits you."

"Suits me fine. But I got a daughter, name of Edna Bowers, meeting me at the station there. How you figure on getting away from her?"

"It won't be difficult. I will stay with her for a few days; then she simply will not see me rolling that chair down the block. I will get to the transfer point by cab and she will turn a report in to the police that her father is missing. They will, of course, not find the missing person."

"You mean you can fix it so she looks right at my body, with you inside it, and don't see anything?"

"Certainly. I can control the mind of anyone of this period at will. Anyone of my time could do so. It's easy."

"You can? Well, then, why in the hell didn't you? Why should you ask me my druthers when you could take over my body whether I liked it or not?"

"That would be highly unethical."

"Sure would. But to save your life, seems to me you wouldn't be so squeamish. People nowadays would think like that, anyway. I can see that they'd have to change a lot before they could be trusted with the kind of powers you got in elsewhere."

"They will," the young man from elsewhere assured him. "Human nature is not immutable. But I take it we are agreed that we trade bodies just before we reach our destination. Shall we have a toast to it?" He filled the old man's shot glass so full it sloshed over in the moving train.

"Before we drink to it," old George objected, "hadn't you ought to give me the money to bind the bargain?"

"Why?" his host asked. "It's in my pocket which will be yours when we trade."

Why? He just asked. It's in my pocket, which will be yours when we trade.

"That's right!" the old man said. "I get the clothes, too, don't I? Kind of a dignified getup. Sure would admire to be seen in that! Here's to it!" They clicked glasses and downed the drinks.

"Now, shall we have some lunch?" Sandane asked.

"You bet. Say, on the train, I'm tempted to order all the things that ain't good for me. If I do, my arthritis will be giving me hell tomorrow. I'm used to that, but as long as you'll be the one to suffer, maybe I should stick to my diet."

"Order what you like. I can control the pain for you easily enough."

"Can you teach me to do that?" the old man asked eagerly. "Wouldn't want you to be giving out any secrets you ain't supposed to, but surely that couldn't do any harm."

"It wouldn't do you any good, either," Sandane replied. "This body won't give you a bit of trouble as long as it lasts. I absolutely guarantee that."

"Not even a headache the morning after?"

"Not even a headache. Not even fatigue."

"Think of it! No hangovers in elsewhen. Must be a wonderful age to live in."

"You'd be surprised how many people want to get away from it," Sandane remarked. "Shall we have something sent in or go to the diner?"

"Let's go to the diner," old George decided. "I want to look over some of the chicks on this train. Could be one of them is a stranger in San Francisco, needs somebody to show her the town."

"Could be," Sandane agreed.

After a hearty lunch, without a look at the right side of the menu, the old man started drinking again. He kept pleasantly tipsy all afternoon, trying to submerge the recurrent thought that this couldn't really be going to happen. Sandane continued to act the affable host, but made no move to put his plan into operation. They were in Sandane's compartment when the loudspeakers

operation. They were in Sandane's compartment when the loudspeakers announced that passengers who were leaving the train at Oakland should get ready. The waiting was getting on the old man's nerves.

"All right," he told Sandane, "if this is all a gag, the joke's finished."

"It's not a joke," Sandane protested.

"Then put up or shut up."

"Very well," Sandane said. "Close your eyes and relax. You will go to sleep for a few moments."

The old man was determined to stay awake to see what went on. But in spite of himself, his eyes closed, his head drooped forward. He dreamed a long and involved dream about cities of the future, where all the people had miraculous powers. It seemed to go on for days, yet when he awoke, with a start, the train still had not reached Oakland.

He stood up abruptly as he realized that he was alone in the compartment. Where was Sandane? Next he realized that he was standing, that he *was* Sandane, or at least in Sandane's body. He took two steps to the mirror and stared at it. Cutaway, striped pants, face the spitting image of Wyatt Earp. It was the old man in the wheelchair who had left the compartment.

When he disembarked at San Francisco, he scanned the crowd for the wheelchair and soon spotted it. Edna had spotted it first—she was pushing it herself while a redcap followed, carrying the blanket and the old battered valise that the occupant of the chair had insisted on taking into his own coach. George tipped his derby to Edna.

"Mrs. Bowers, I presume? Your father was telling me many nice things about you on the train."

Edna laughed. "So you're the gentleman he was with! I guessed from his breath he'd had company!"

"Now, Edna," a cracked old voice complained, "ain't no harm in buying a few drinks for an old man."

George looked at the man in the chair in amazement. Was that the way he had sounded? Somehow, through the hearing aid, his own voice had seemed louder, less faltering.

"Only too happy to do it, sir," George said. "The pleasure was all mine." He wanted to add that Sandane was acting his part superbly, but didn't know just how to say it before Edna.

"We could give you a lift to your hotel," Edna suggested.

"Thank you, madam, but I don't believe I shall check into a hotel as yet. I shall leave my bags here until later in the evening." George was surprised how quickly he had assumed the manner of speaking that went with his clothes.

"Well, take a couple of drinks for me," the old voice interjected. "Say hello to them pretty girls for me, too. So long, Sandy, and good luck."

"So long, George," George replied, his voice choking up with pity for an old man who could not do what he wanted to do on this beautiful evening, in this beautiful city.

When they had gone, he walked out of the station, enjoying every step of the vigorous young legs, feeling every muscle of the vigorous young body, glowing with life. Outside, he paused for a moment on the sidewalk before calling a cab.

Two weeks, give or take a day or so, would be long enough to do the town. And two thousand dollars, give or take twenty, would be enough to do it on. The young-old man from elsewhen and the present was going to have one hell of a good time.

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