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Crossroads of Destiny

by

H. Beam Piper

No wonder he'd been so interested in the talk of whether our people accepted these theories!

Readers who remember the Hon. Stephen Silk, diplomat extraordinary, in Lone Star Planet (FU, March 1957), later published as A Planet For Texans (Ace Books), will find the present story a

challenging departure—this possibility that the history we know may not be absolute....

CROSSROADS OF DESTINY

I still have the dollar bill. It's in my box at the bank, and I think that's where it will stay. I simply won't destroy it, but I can think of nobody to whom I'd be willing to show it—certainly nobody at the college, my History Department colleagues least of all. Merely to tell the story would brand me irredeemably as a crackpot, but crackpots are tolerated, even on college faculties. It's only when they begin producing physical evidence that they get themselves actively resented.

When I went into the club-car for a nightcap before going back to my compartment to turn in, there were five men there, sitting together.

One was an Army officer, with the insignia and badges of a Staff Intelligence colonel. Next to him was a man of about my own age, with sandy hair and a bony, Scottish looking face, who sat staring silently into a highball which he held in both hands. Across the aisle, an elderly man, who could have been a lawyer or a banker, was smoking a cigar over a glass of port, and beside him sat a plump and slightly too well groomed individual who had a tall colorless drink, probably gin-and-tonic. The fifth man, separated from him by a vacant chair, seemed to be dividing his attention between a book on his lap and the conversation, in which he was taking no part. I sat down beside the sandy-haired man; as I did so and rang for the waiter, the colonel was saying:

"No, that wouldn't. I can think of a better one. Suppose you have Columbus get his ships from Henry the Seventh of England and sail under the English instead of the Spanish flag. You know, he did try to get English backing, before he went to Spain, but King Henry turned him down. That could be changed."

I pricked up my ears. The period from 1492 to the Revolution is my special field of American history, and I knew, at once, the enormous difference that would have made. It was a moment later that I realized how oddly the colonel had expressed the idea, and by that time the plump man was speaking.

"Yes, that would work," he agreed. "Those kings made decisions, most of the time, on whether or not they had a hangover, or what some court favorite thought." He got out a notebook and pen and scribbled briefly. "I'll hand that to the planning staff when I get to New York. That's Henry the Seventh, not Henry the Eighth? Right. We'll fix it so that Columbus will catch him when he's in a good humor."

That was too much. I turned to the man beside me.

"What goes on?" I asked. "Has somebody invented a time machine?"

He looked up from the drink he was contemplating and gave me a grin.

"Sounds like it, doesn't it? Why, no; our friend here is getting up a television program. Tell the gentleman about it," he urged the plump man across the aisle.

The waiter arrived at that moment. The plump man, who seemed to need little urging, waited until I had ordered a drink and then began telling me what a positively sensational idea it was.

"We're calling it *Crossroads of Destiny*," he said. "It'll be a series, one half-hour show a week; in each episode, we'll take some historic event and show how history could have been changed if something had happened differently. We dramatize the event up to that point just as it really happened, and then a commentary-voice comes on and announces that this is the Crossroads of Destiny; this is where history could have been completely changed. Then he gives a resumé of what really did happen, and then he says, '*But*—suppose so and so had done this and that, instead of such and such.' Then we pick up the dramatization at that point, only we show it the way it might have happened. Like this thing about Columbus; we'll show how it could have happened, and end with Columbus wading ashore with his sword in one hand and a flag in the other, just like the painting, only it'll be the English flag, and Columbus will shout: 'I take possession of this new land in the name of His Majesty, Henry the Seventh of England!'" He brandished his drink, to the visible consternation of the elderly man beside him. "And then, the sailors all sing *God Save the King*."

"Which wasn't written till about 1745," I couldn't help mentioning.

"Huh?" The plump man looked startled. "Are you sure?" Then he decided that I was, and shrugged. "Well, they can all shout, 'God Save King Henry!' or 'St. George for England!' or something. Then, at the end, we introduce the program guest, some history expert, a real name, and he tells how he thinks history would have been changed if it had happened this way."

The conservatively dressed gentleman beside him wanted to know how long he expected to keep the show running.

"The crossroads will give out before long," he added.

"The sponsor'll give out first," I said. "History is just one damn crossroads after another." I mentioned, in passing, that I taught the subject. "Why, since the beginning of this century, we've had enough of them to keep the show running for a year."

"We have about twenty already written and ready to produce," the plump man said comfortably, "and ideas for twice as many that the planning staff is working on now."

The elderly man accepted that and took another cautious sip of wine.

"What I wonder, though, is whether you can really say that history can be changed."

"Well, of course—" The television man was taken aback; one always seems to be when a basic assumption is questioned. "Of course, we only know what really did happen, but it stands to reason if something had happened differently, the results would have been different, doesn't it?"

"But it seems to me that everything would work out the same in the long run. There'd be some differences at the time, but over the years wouldn't they all cancel out?"

"*Non, non, Monsieur!*" the man with the book, who had been outside the conversation until now, told him earnestly. "Make no mistake; 'istoree can be shange!"

I looked at him curiously. The accent sounded French, but it wasn't quite right. He was some kind of a foreigner, though; I'd swear that he never bought the clothes he was wearing in this country. The way the suit fitted, and the cut of it, and the shirt-collar, and the necktie. The book he was reading was Langmuir's *Social History of the American People*—not one of my favorites, a bit too much on the doctrinaire side, but what a bookshop clerk would give a foreigner looking for something to explain America.

"What do you think, Professor?" the plump man was asking me.

"It would work out the other way. The differences wouldn't cancel out; they'd accumulate. Say something happened a century ago, to throw a presidential election the other way. You'd get different people at the head of the government, opposite lines of policy taken, and eventually we'd be getting into different wars with different enemies at different times, and different batches of young men killed before they could marry and have families—different people being born or not being born. That would mean different ideas, good or bad, being advanced; different books written; different inventions, and different social and economic problems as a consequence."

"Look, he's only giving himself a century," the colonel added. "Think of the changes if this thing we were discussing, Columbus sailing under the English flag, had happened. Or suppose Leif Ericson had been able to plant a permanent colony in America in the Eleventh Century, or if the Saracens had won the Battle of Tours. Try to imagine the world today if any of those things had happened. One thing you can be sure of—any errors you make in trying to imagine such a world will be on the side of over-conservatism."

The sandy-haired man beside me, who had been using his highball for a crystal ball, must have glimpsed in it what he was looking for. He finished the drink, set the empty glass on the stand-tray beside him, and reached back to push the button.

"I don't think you realize just how good an idea you have, here," he told the plump man abruptly. "If you did, you wouldn't ruin it with such timid and unimaginative treatment."

I thought he'd been staying out of the conversation because it was over his head. Instead, he had been taking the plump man's idea apart, examining all the pieces, and considering what was wrong with it and how it could be improved. The plump man looked startled, and then angry—timid and unimaginative were the last things he'd expected his idea to be called. Then he became uneasy. Maybe this fellow was a typical representative of his lord and master, the faceless abstraction called the Public.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Misplaced emphasis. You shouldn't emphasize the event that could have changed history; you should emphasize the changes that could have been made. You're going to end this show you were talking about

with a shot of Columbus wading up to the beach with an English flag, aren't you?"

"Well, that's the logical ending."

"That's the logical beginning," the sandy-haired man contradicted. "And after that, your guest historian comes on; how much time will he be allowed?"

"Well, maybe three or four minutes. We can't cut the dramatization too short—"

"And he'll have to explain, a couple of times, and in words of one syllable, that what we have seen didn't really happen, because if he doesn't, the next morning half the twelve-year-old kids in the country will be rushing wild-eyed into school to slip the teacher the real inside about the discovery of America. By the time he gets that done, he'll be able to mumble a couple of generalities about vast and incalculable effects, and then it'll be time to tell the public about Widgets, the really safe cigarettes, all filter and absolutely free from tobacco."

The waiter arrived at this point, and the sandy-haired man ordered another rye highball. I decided to have another bourbon on the rocks, and the TV impresario said, "Gin-and-tonic," absently, and went into a reverie which lasted until the drinks arrived. Then he came awake again.

"I see what you mean," he said. "Most of the audience would wonder what difference it would have made where Columbus would have gotten his ships, as long as he got them and America got discovered. I can see it would have made a hell of a big difference. But how could it be handled any other way? How could you figure out just what the difference would have been?"

"Well, you need a man who'd know the historical background, and you'd need a man with a powerful creative imagination, who is used to using it inside rigorously defined limits. Don't try to get them both in one; a collaboration would really be better. Then you work from the known situation in Europe and in America in 1492, and decide on the immediate effects. And from that, you have to carry it along, step by step, down to the present. It would be a lot of hard and very exacting work, but the result would be worth it." He took a sip from his glass and added: "Remember, you don't have to prove that the world today would be the way you set it up. All you have to do is make sure that nobody else would be able to prove that it wouldn't."

"Well, how could you present that?"

"As a play, with fictional characters and a plot; time, the present, under the changed conditions. The plot—the reason the coward conquers his fear and becomes a hero, the obstacle to the boy marrying the girl, the reason the innocent man is being persecuted—will have to grow out of this imaginary world you've constructed, and be impossible in our real world. As long as you stick to that, you're all right."

"Sure. I get that." The plump man was excited again; he was about half sold on the idea. "But how will we get the audience to accept it? We're asking them to start with an assumption they know isn't true."

"Maybe it is, in another time-dimension," the colonel suggested. "You can't prove it isn't. For that matter, you can't prove there aren't other time-dimensions."

"Hah, that's it!" the sandy-haired man exclaimed. "World of alternate probability. That takes care of that."

He drank about a third of his highball and sat gazing into the rest of it, in an almost yogic trance. The plump man looked at the colonel in bafflement.

"Maybe this alternate-probability time-dimension stuff means something to you," he said. "Be damned if it does to me."

"Well, as far as we know, we live in a four-dimensional universe," the colonel started.

The elderly man across from him groaned. "Fourth dimension! Good God, are we going to talk about that?"

"It isn't anything to be scared of. You carry an instrument for measuring in the fourth dimension all the time. A watch."

"You mean it's just time? But that isn't—"

"We know of three dimensions of space," the colonel told him, gesturing to indicate them. "We can use them for coordinates to locate things, but we also locate things in time. I wouldn't like to ride on a train or a plane if we didn't. Well, let's call the time we know, the time your watch registers, Time-A. Now, suppose the entire, infinite extent of Time-A is only an instant in another dimension of time, which we'll call Time-B. The next instant of Time-B is also the entire extent of Time-A, and the next and the next. As in Time-A, different things are happening at different instants. In one of these instants of Time-B, one of the things that's happening is that King Henry the Seventh of England is furnishing ships to Christopher Columbus."

The man with the odd clothes was getting excited again.

"Zees—'ow you say—zees alternate probabeelitay; eet ees a theory zhenerally accept' een zees countree?"

"Got it!" the sandy-haired man said, before anybody could answer. He set his drink on the stand-tray and took a big jackknife out of his pocket, holding it unopened in his hand. "How's this sound?" he asked, and hit the edge of the tray with the back of the knife, *Bong!*

"Crossroads—of—*Destiny!*" he intoned, and hit the edge of the tray again, *Bong!* "This is the year 1959—but not the 1959 of our world, for we are in a world of alternate probability, in another dimension of time; a world parallel to and coexistent with but separate from our own, in which history has been completely altered by a single momentous event." He shifted back to his normal voice.

"Not bad; only twenty-five seconds," the plump man said, looking up from his wrist watch. "And a trained announcer could maybe shave five seconds off that. Yes, something like that, and at the end we'll have another thirty seconds, and we can do without the guest."

"But zees alternate probibeelitay, in anoizzer dimension," the stranger was insisting. "Ees zees a concept

original weet you?" he asked the colonel.

"Oh, no; that idea's been around for a long time."

"I never heard of it before now," the elderly man said, as though that completely demolished it.

"Zen eet ees zhenerally accept' by zee scienteest'?"

"Umm, no," the sandy-haired man relieved the colonel. "There's absolutely no evidence to support it, and scientists don't accept unsupported assumptions unless they need them to explain something, and they don't need this assumption for anything. Well, it would come in handy to make some of these reports of freak phenomena, like mysterious appearances and disappearances, or flying-object sightings, or reported falls of non-meteoritic matter, theoretically respectable. Reports like that usually get the ignore-and-forget treatment, now."

"Zen you believe zat zeese ozzer world of zee alternate probabeelity, zey exist'?"

"No. I don't disbelieve it, either. I've no reason to, one way or another." He studied his drink for a moment, and lowered the level in the glass slightly. "I've said that once in a while things get reported that look as though such other worlds, in another time-dimension, may exist. There have been whole books published by people who collect stories like that. I must say that academic science isn't very hospitable to them."

"You mean, zings sometimes, 'ow-you-say, leak in from one of zees ozzer worlds? Zat has been known to 'appen'?"

"Things have been said to have happened that might, if true, be cases of things leaking through from another time world," the sandy-haired man corrected. "Or leaking away to another time world." He mentioned a few of the more famous cases of unexplained mysteries—the English diplomat in Prussia who vanished in plain sight of a number of people, the ship found completely deserted by her crew, the lifeboats all in place; stories like that. "And there's this rash of alleged sightings of unidentified flying objects. I'd sooner believe that they came from another dimension than from another planet. But, as far as I know, nobody's seriously advanced this other-time-dimension theory to explain them."

"I think the idea's familiar enough, though, that we can use it as an explanation, or pseudo-explanation, for the program," the television man said. "Fact is, we aren't married to this Crossroads title, yet; we could just as easily all it *Fifth Dimension*. That would lead the public, to expect something out of the normal before the show started."

That got the conversation back onto the show, and we talked for some time about it, each of us suggesting possibilities. The stranger even suggested one—that the Civil War had started during the Jackson Administration. Fortunately, nobody else noticed that. Finally, a porter came through and inquired if any of us were getting off at Harrisburg, saying that we would be getting in in five minutes.

The stranger finished his drink hastily and got up, saying that he would have to get his luggage. He told us how much he had enjoyed the conversation, and then followed the porter toward the rear of the train. After he had gone out, the TV man chuckled.

"Was that one an oddball!" he exclaimed. "Where the hell do you suppose he got that suit?"

"It was a tailored suit," the colonel said. "A very good one. And I can't think of any country in the world in which they cut suits just like that. And did you catch his accent?"

"Phony," the television man pronounced. "The French accent of a Greek waiter in a fake French restaurant. In the Bronx."

"Not quite. The pronunciation was all right for French accent, but the cadence, the way the word-sounds were strung together, was German."

The elderly man looked at the colonel keenly. "I see you're Intelligence," he mentioned. "Think he might be somebody up your alley, Colonel?"

The colonel shook his head. "I doubt it. There are agents of unfriendly powers in this country—a lot of them, I'm sorry to have to say. But they don't speak accented English, and they don't dress eccentrically. You know there's an enemy agent in a crowd, pick out the most normally American type in sight and you usually won't have to look further."

The train ground to a stop. A young couple with hand-luggage came in and sat at one end of the car, waiting until other accommodations could be found for them. After a while, it started again. I dallied over my drink, and then got up and excused myself, saying that I wanted to turn in early.

In the next car behind, I met the porter who had come in just before the stop. He looked worried, and after a moment's hesitation, he spoke to me.

"Pardon, sir. The man in the club-car who got off at Harrisburg; did you know him?"

"Never saw him before. Why?"

"He tipped me with a dollar bill when he got off. Later, I looked closely at it. I do not like it."

He showed it to me, and I didn't blame him. It was marked *One Dollar*, and *United States of America*, but outside that there wasn't a thing right about it. One side was gray, all right, but the other side was green. The picture wasn't the right one. And there were a lot of other things about it, some of them absolutely ludicrous. It wasn't counterfeit—it wasn't even an imitation of a United States bill.

And then it hit me, like a bullet in the chest. Not a bill of *our* United States. No wonder he had been so interested in whether our scientists accepted the theory of other time dimensions and other worlds of alternate probability!

On an impulse, I got out two ones and gave them to the porter—perfectly good United States Bank

gold-certificates.

"You'd better let me keep this," I said, trying to make it sound the way he'd think a Federal Agent would say it. He took the bills, smiling, and I folded his bill and put it into my vest pocket.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I have no wish to keep it."

Some part of my mind below the level of consciousness must have taken over and guided me back to the right car and compartment; I didn't realize where I was going till I put on the light and recognized my own luggage. Then I sat down, as dizzy as though the two drinks I had had, had been a dozen. For a moment, I was tempted to rush back to the club-car and show the thing to the colonel and the sandy-haired man. On second thought, I decided against that.

The next thing I banished from my mind was the adjective "incredible." I had to credit it; I had the proof in my vest pocket. The coincidence arising from our topic of conversation didn't bother me too much, either. It was the topic which had drawn him into it. And, as the sandy-haired man had pointed out, we know nothing, one way or another, about these other worlds; we certainly don't know what barriers separate them from our own, or how often those barriers may fail. I might have thought more about that if I'd been in physical science. I wasn't; I was in American history. So what I thought about was what sort of country that other United States must be, and what its history must have been.

The man's costume was basically the same as ours—same general style, but many little differences of fashion. I had the impression that it was the costume of a less formal and conservative society than ours and a more casual way of life. It could be the sort of costume into which ours would evolve in another thirty or so years. There was another odd thing. I'd noticed him looking curiously at both the waiter and the porter, as though something about them surprised him. The only thing they had in common was their race, the same as every other passenger-car attendant. But he wasn't used to seeing Chinese working in railway cars.

And there had been that remark about the Civil War and the Jackson Administration. I wondered what Jackson he had been talking about; not Andrew Jackson, the Tennessee militia general who got us into war with Spain in 1810, I hoped. And the Civil War; that had baffled me completely. I wondered if it had been a class-war, or a sectional conflict. We'd had plenty of the latter, during our first century, but all of them had been settled peacefully and Constitutionally. Well, some of the things he'd read in Lingmuir's *Social History* would be surprises for him, too.

And then I took the bill out for another examination. It must have gotten mixed with his spendable money—it was about the size of ours—and I wondered how he had acquired enough of our money to pay his train fare. Maybe he'd had a diamond and sold it, or maybe he'd had a gun and held somebody up. If he had, I didn't know that I blamed him, under the circumstances. I had an idea that he had some realization of what had happened to him—the book, and the fake accent, to cover any mistakes he might make. Well, I wished him luck, and then I unfolded the dollar bill and looked at it again.

In the first place, it had been issued by the United States Department of Treasury itself, not the United States Bank or one of the State Banks. I'd have to think over the implications of that carefully. In the second place, it was a silver certificate; why, in this other United States, silver must be an acceptable monetary metal; maybe equally so with gold, though I could hardly believe that. Then I looked at the

picture on the gray obverse side, and had to strain my eyes on the fine print under it to identify it. It was Washington, all right, but a much older Washington than any of the pictures of him I had ever seen. Then I realized that I knew just where the Crossroads of Destiny for his world and mine had been.

As every schoolchild among us knows, General George Washington was shot dead at the Battle of Germantown, in 1777, by an English, or, rather, Scottish, officer, Patrick Ferguson—the same Patrick Ferguson who invented the breech-loading rifle that smashed Napoleon's armies. Washington, today, is one of our lesser national heroes, because he was our first military commander-in-chief. But in this other world, he must have survived to lead our armies to victory and become our first President, as was the case with the man who took his place when he was killed.

I folded the bill and put it away carefully among my identification cards, where it wouldn't a second time get mixed with the money I spent, and as I did, I wondered what sort of a President George Washington had made, and what part, in the history of that other United States, had been played by the man whose picture appears on our dollar bills—General and President Benedict Arnold.

THE END.

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