

Two Views of a Cave Painting

Langdon St. Ives

by James Blaylock, 1950–

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I'm opposed to giving advice and making weighty statements on general principle; we're wrong as often as not, and look like fools. But it's safe to say this: ruination, utter ruination, might be as close to us now as is the proverbial snake, and but for the grace of the Deity and the cleverness of friends, we might at any moment find that by a slip of memory we've brought about the collapse of worlds.

I wouldn't have thought it so. I've believed that there was room in our lives for casual error, that we could shrug and grin and suffer mild regret and the world would wag along for better or worse. Well, no more; recent events have proven me wrong. The slightest slip of the hand, the forgetting of the most trivial business, the uttering of an unremarkable bit of foolishness might plunge us, as Mr. Poe would have it, into the maelstrom. It fell out like this:

We'd been out on the Salisbury—Plain Professor Langdon St. Ives; his man Hasbro; and myself, Jack Owlesby—digging for relics. I haven't got much taste for relics, but the company was good, and there is an inn that goes by the name of The Quarter Pygmy in Andover where I've eaten Cornish pasty that was alone worth the trip down from London.

St. Ives discovered, quite by accident one hot, desolate, fly-ridden afternoon, a cave beneath an isolated hillside, covered in shrub and lost to the world thousands of years ago. If you've been to Salisbury and ridden across the plain as a tourist in a coach-and-four, then you know how such a thing could be; there's nothing there, for the most part, to attract anyone but an archeologist, and most of them are chasing down Druids. St. Ives was after fossils.

And he found them too; by the bushel-basketful. They littered the cave floor, dusty and dry, the femurs of megatheria, the tusks of woolly mammoths, the jawbones of heaven-knows-what sorts of sauria. St. Ives rather suspected they'd be there. He intended, he said, to make use of them.

The cave had been occupied in a distant age. Neanderthal man had lived there, or at least had come and gone. There was a cave painting, is what I'm trying to say, on the wall. I know nothing of the art of painting on cave walls, but I can tell you that this one was very nice indeed. It was the painting of a man, bearded and hairy-headed like an unkempt lion and barely decent with a loose covering of pelts. His countenance was bent into a thoughtful frown—a pensive cave man, if such a thing were possible. The painting was a self-portrait, and, said St. Ives, in quality it rivaled the famous bison painting from the cave of Altamira, Spain, or the reindeer drawings from the cavern of Aurignac. The artist had caught his own soul in berry-tinted oil, as well as his beetling brow and shaggy head.

This strikes you, I'm certain, as a weighty discovery. But you'd look in vain in the scientific journals for word of it. Our enterprises there fell out rather ill, as you might have judged from the tone of the first page of this account, and it's only recently that I've been able to take up the pen and reveal the grim truth of it. In the months since our return from that cave on the Salisbury Plain I've invented reasons, any number of them, to cast a shadow over our enterprise. St. Ives and Hasbro, the two men who might have given me away, are gentlemen through and through, and have kept quiet on the score. But you might have read in the *Times* a week past news of an explosion—an „upheaval of the earth“, I believe they called it, in their uncomprehending, euphemistic way—which collapsed a section of countryside a bit north and west of Andover on the Salisbury Plain. They heard the explosion, no doubt, at the Pygmy. In fact, I know they did; I was there, and I heard it myself.

„An act of God!“ cried the Royal Academy, and so unwittingly they paid the highest compliment, albeit it a trifling exaggeration, that they've paid yet to my mentor and friend, Langdon St. Ives. The business had his mark on it, to be sure, although I'll insist that I myself had no hand in it. With the collapse of the bit of countryside. however, was buried forever the only known evidence of my abominable folly and buried along with it were months of worry and guilt, which St. Ives no doubt grew weary and sorrowful for at long last.

I wish to heaven such were the end of it, but I can't, of course, be entirely sure. I'm taking it on faith here. In matters involving the curiosities of traveling in time, and the complexities of meddling with the very structure of the universe itself, one must expect the odd surprise: the Neanderthal man in a

hair piece, the Azilian mummy with a Van Dyke beard. One never knows, does one? It fell out like this:

When the volcano business was over with and St. Ives's great nemesis, Dr. Ignacio Narbono, had been swallowed by a frozen lake in Scandinavia, the professor had, for the first time in decades, the leisure time to pursue a study he'd gotten on to some ten years earlier. Time travel isn't news anymore. Mr. H.G. Wells has put it to good use in a book which the casual reader would doubtless regard as a fiction. And perhaps it was. I, certainly, haven't seen the wonderful machine, although I have met the so-called Time Traveler, or someone masquerading as the man, broken and teary-eyed at Lady Beech-Smythe's summer house in Tadcaster. He was weeping into his ale glass—a man who had seen more than was good for him.

I have too, which is what I'm writing about here. Though to be more accurate, it wasn't so much what I saw that has stayed my pen these past months as what I did. This, then, is a confessional as much as anything else, and if it's wrath such a thing provokes, I'm your man to suffer it.

St. Ives, in a word, had cast upon a way to travel through time, quite independent of the methods of Wells's hero. The professor had been studying iridium traces in fossil bone, and had developed theories about the decline of the prehistoric monsters. But it wasn't entirely the scientific data that put him in the way of a method to leap through time, it was something other than that. I won't say more than that, for there is no room here to drag in questions of a spiritual or mythologic nature.

Let it suffice that there is something in a fossil—in the stony little trilobite which, five hundred million years ago, crept along Devonian seabottoms; or, say the femur of a great toothed whale that shared Eocene seas with fish lizards and plesiosaurs. St. Ives possessed, I remember, the complete skeletal remains of a pterodactyl, which reposed in mid-flight twelve feet above the floor of his vast library in Harrogate, as if the books and busts and scattered furniture of the room below were the inhabitants of a Cretaceous jungle clearing, and the thunder of the train rattling past toward Stoke Newington were the ebb and flow of prehistoric tides on a trackless beach.

There is enchantment in a fossil, is what I mean to say. St. Ives saw that straightaway. It might well be enchantment that scientists of the graph-and-caliper variety would wave into nonexistence if they had a chance at it. But Haitian islanders, in their ignorance of modern science, can dissolve a man's nose by splashing chicken blood into the face of a doll. I've seen it done. Hand the chicken blood and the doll—made of sticks and rags—to the president of the Royal Academy, and ask him to have a go at it. Your man's nose will be safe as a baby.

There are forces at work, you see, that haven't yet been quantified. They hover roundabout us in the air, like wraiths, and you and I are blind to them. But a man like St. Ives—that man carries with him a pair of spectacles, which, in a fit of sudden inspiration, he claps over his eyes. He frowns and squints. And there, winging it across the misty, cloud-drift sky, is—what? In this case it was a device which would enable him to travel through time. I don't mean to say that the device itself could be seen winging it through the clouds. I was speaking figuratively there. I'm afraid, now that I'm pressed, that my discussion of his device must remain in that vague and nebulous level, for I'm no scientist,

and I hadn't a foggy notion on that morning when I stepped into the device and clutched the copper grips, whither the day's adventure might take me. It was enough, entirely enough, that I had St. Ives's word on the matter.

It wasn't electricity, despite the copper, nor was it explosives that hurtled us backward through time. There was a shudder and a gust of faint wind that smelled like the first fall of rain on paving stones. The little collection of fossils that were heaped on a copper plate on the floor between us shook and seemed for the moment to levitate. I had the frightening sensation of falling a great distance, of tumbling head over heels through a black void. At the same time it seemed as if I were watching myself fall, as if somehow I were having one of those out-of-body experiences that the spiritualists rely upon. In short, I was both falling and hovering above my falling self at one and the same time. Then, after an immeasurable passage through the darkness, an orange and murky light began to dawn, and without so much as a sigh, the fossils settled and the falling rush abated. I was whole once more, and together we stepped out into the interior of that cavern on Salisbury Plain.

I'd seen the cavern before, of course, any number of times in a distant age, and so I was understandably surprised that the painting of the cave man was missing. On the wall were sketches of Paleolithic animals, freshly drawn, the oily paint still soft. I remembered them as a sort of background for the more intricately drawn human in the foreground. St. Ives immediately pointed out what I should have understood—that the artist had only begun his work, and that he would doubtless finish it in the days that followed.

If we had arrived an hour earlier or later, we might well have caught him at it. St. Ives was relieved that such a thing hadn't happened. The cave artist mustn't see us, said the Professor. And so adamant was he on the issue that he hinted, to my immense surprise, that if he had been there, laboring over the tail of an elephant, turning around in wonder to see us appear out of the mists of time, we mightn't have any choice but to kill the man then and there—and not with the pistol in St. Ives's bag, but we must crush his head with a stone and, God help us, finish his cave painting ourselves. St. Ives produced a sketch of it, accurate to the last hair of the man's unkempt beard.

Traveling in time, it was to turn out, was a vastly more complicated business than I could have guessed. The curious talk of beaming the cave man with a stone was only the beginning of it. St. Ives had unearthed his fossils in that very grotto, and, in the years that followed, he had stumbled across two immeasurably sensible ideas: first, that the use of fossil forces as a means of time travel would impel one not just anywhere in prehistory, but to that time in prehistory from whence came the fossil. Second, one had to make very sure, when he disappeared from one age and appeared abruptly in another, that he didn't say, spring into reexistence in the middle of a tree or a hillside or, heaven help him, in the space occupied by some poor cave painter bent over his work. This last we had had to take our chances on.

St. Ives determined that by launching from the interior of the cave itself, utilizing fossils discovered at that precise spot—perhaps the gnawed bones of a Cro-Magnon feast—we would be guaranteed a landing, so to speak, in the very same cave thirty-five thousand years past, and not in an adjacent tree-thick forest. The reasoning was sound. It would have been much more convenient, of course, to have launched from the laboratory in Harrogate, and so have dispensed with the arduous task of secretly transporting the device and the

fossils nearly three hundred kilometers across central England. But that wouldn't have done at all. St. Ives assures me that a very grand and destructive explosion might have been the result, and the three of us reduced to atoms.

So there we were, three men from 1902, carrying Gladstone bags, scrutinizing a cave painting on which a real live Neanderthal man had been daubing paint a half hour earlier, utterly unaware that hurtling toward him through the depths of time was a machine full of spectacled men from the future. It would almost have been worth it to see his face when we winked into existence behind him. Well, not entirely worth it, I suppose; not if we'd had to beat him with a stone.

The morning was fast declining, and although we had, as I said, Ruhmkorff lamps, and had brought along food in our bags, and so could have passed a comfortable enough night there on the plain, St. Ives was in a hurry to finish his research and be off. The lamps were an emergency precaution, he said. If all went according to plan, we'd while away the afternoon and launch at dusk. We mustn't be seen, he reminded us again. We had accomplished a third of our mission by having arrived at all—the half-completed painting was proof enough that we'd effectively disposed of several hundred centuries. We would accomplish another third when we found ourselves safe at home at last, or at least once again in our own century, where we could spend the night on the plain if we chose to. The final third was simple enough, it seemed to me: we'd observe, is what we'd do. A „field study“ St. Ives called it, although it seemed to him to be the most ticklish business of the lot. We would lounge about, keeping ourselves hidden behind a tumble of rock a hundred meters above the cave, and every now and again we'd pop up and snap a photograph of a wandering bison or cave bear, and haul the evidence back to London, where the Royal Academy would be toppled onto their collective ear.

I hefted my bag and slung a tripod over my shoulder and made as if to set out. St. Ives nearly throttled himself stopping me. „Your footprints“ he said, pointing to the soft silt of the cave floor. And there, sure enough, were the prints of a pair of boots bought in Bond Street, London, either three weeks or thirty-five centuries earlier, I couldn't have said for certain at the time. St. Ives yanked a feather duster out of his bag and went to work on the prints. He was a man possessed. There mustn't be a trace, he said, of our coming and going. It took us the better part of an hour, sneaking and skulking and breaking our backs with the hurry of it, to transport the machine, which, thank heaven, was remarkably light and could be partially dismantled, up to our aerie in the rocks. Then we were at it for another hour in the gloom of evening, dusting away tracks, replacing pebbles kicked aside in haste, grafting the snapped limb of a scrub plant back onto itself—taking frightful care, in other words, that no sentient being could remark our passing, and all the time Hasbro keeping watch above, whistling us into hiding at the approach of so much as a rodent.

We daren't, said St. Ives, meddle with anything. The slightest alteration in the natural state of the landscape might have ungovernable consequences in ages to come. The universe, it seems, is but a tenuous, delicate composition, rather like the reflected jumble of tinted jewels in a kaleidoscope. If one holds still while gazing into the end of the thing, the jewels sit there perfectly at ease, as if the reflected pattern isn't a clever ruse after all, but is a church window fixed into a wall of cut stone. But the slightest jiggling—the blink of an eye or the tremor of a sudden chill—casts the jewels into disarray, and no earthly

amount of twisting and shaking and wishing will fetch them back again in the lost order. And so goes the universe.

What if a bug, said St. Ives, were crushed inadvertently underfoot, and that bug weren't as a result, eaten, say, by the toad which, historically, would have eaten that bug had the bug not been crushed by a bootheel that had no business being there in the first place. That toad might die—mightn't he?—for lack of a bug to eat, or from having eaten another bug out of desperation that he hadn't ought to have eaten. And the wild dog that would have eaten the toad, he'd go hungry, you see, and attempt the conquest of a toad which the universe had earmarked for an utterly different dog, who, everything being built upon everything else, like the crystals, as I said, in a kaleidoscope, would have to turn out and eat a rabbit. And that rabbit, which otherwise would have lived into a satisfying old age and bore six dozen rabbits very much like it, would be dead—wouldn't it?—and no end of prehistoric beasts would be denied the pleasure of dining on those six dozen rabbits.

You see how it goes. When St. Ives laid it out for me I was transfixed. I could tell straightaway that our puny comings and goings through the veil of time were as nothing in the eyes of the universe, compared to the brief few hours we intended to spend among the stones of the hillside. A bug and a toad and six dozen rabbits and pretty soon the entire local crowd is in an uproar. The universe they thought they could depend on has gone to smash. A megatherium looks for roots to nibble one morning and the roots are gone, because a half score wild dogs have moved to the coast where the rabbit population is more dependable, and the rabbits, finding travel a safer thing than it was last week, reproduce tenfold and make up, as they say, for lost time. Their offspring eat the roots that the megatherium thought he could count on and so he eats someone else's roots and so on and so on, magnified over countless centuries.

The crowning result is that the people of London aren't the people of London anymore at all. The Romans never arrived, for reasons that can be traced, if one had the right instruments, to the crushed bug. The Greeks, say, got in before them, and lived in the countryside in huts, spinning philosophies, and made peace with their Celtic neighbors and the middle ages crept past without so much as a mention of feudal states. I can tell you that it boggled my mind, to use the popular phrase, when St. Ives told me about it. That crushed bug, depend on it, would send the jewels tumbling, and where they'd fall, no one on Earth could puzzle out, try as he might and given a notebook and pen to calculate with.

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We were dusty and hot before we were done that evening. A mammoth had come past, as if looking for something he'd lost, and St. Ives snapped a dozen photographs of the beast before it ambled away. Then a rhinoceros of some vintage appeared, and out came the camera again. I was a frightful mass of dirt and stinging insects and, indelicate as it sounds, perspiration, and was surprised to find a pool of clear water in the rocks, the product of a slowly running spring. I spent a cool half hour scrubbing up, and was happy enough to have brought along the requisite toiletries.

One is tempted—or at least I am—to dispense with the niceties when traveling rough. What purpose is there in trimming one's mustache, you ask, when one is tenting in the Hebrides? We can take a lesson from Robinson

Crusoe, who maintained a degree of gentility even when lost forever, he supposed, on a desert island. Which one of us wouldn't have run naked with the savages before the month was gone? Not Crusoe. And so with me. I tread on the temptation to run with the savages, and although in truth I neglected to bring a mustache scissors (we were to be away, at most, for half a day) I carried with me a comb and brush and a bottle of rose oil, and, as I say, I wielded those tools to good effect while St. Ives, caught up in the fever of his picture-taking, let me go about my business.

And I was careful. There were tiny fish, in fact, down in that shallow pool, fish that had no need for a dose of rose oil. I skimmed three broken hairs from the placid surface—which surface I had used as a mirror—and I put the hairs in my pocket and carried them back with me.

I had finished up and felt entirely restored when the sun, with a rapidity which never fails to amaze me, sank beyond the primeval horizon. Night descended like a lead curtain, and almost at once there sounded roundabout us such a shrieking and mewling and growling as I hope never to hear again. The night was alive with prowling beasts, and us with neither shelter nor fire. We were at it again, hustling the machine back into the cave. Our cave painter hadn't yet returned. With a cloth thrown over a lamp, once again we scoured out our footprints, watching with wary nervousness the pairs of eyes that shined at us out of the darkness. We launched an hour after sunset, and I heartily believed, along with St. Ives and Hasbro, that we left behind us not a trace of our having been there—nothing which might in the least joggle the delicate mechanism of the temporal and spacial universe.

We arrived in the twentieth century, in the familiar cave on the Salisbury Plain. All of us, since St. Ives' remonstrances, were leery of what we'd find. Stonehenge, we feared, would be whisked away and replaced by a picket fence enclosing a pumpkin patch. The wagon load of tourists bound for Wiltshire would have their hats on backward or would wear spectacles the size and shape of starfish. When one thought about it, it seemed almost a miracle that no such incongruity confronted us when we peered out of the door of that cave. There was the plain, dusty and hot, Marlborough to the north, Andover to the east, London, for aught we could determine, bustling along the shores of the Thames some few miles away, beyond the horizon.

I, for one, breathed a hearty sigh of relief. The last third of our mission had been ticked off the list, and another chapter in the great book of the adventures of Langdon St. Ives had come to a happy close. His camera was full of photographs. His time machine was faultless. There lay our cart and tarpaulin. We had only to load the device and the gear and away. The Royal Academy was a plum for the plucking.

I hefted my bag, grinning. For the moment. Something, however, seemed to be tugging at the corners of my mouth, effacing the grin. What was it? I gave St. Ives a look, and he could see quite clearly, from the puzzlement on my face, that something was amiss. I felt, abruptly, like a caveman smitten across the noggin with a stone.

My toiletries kit—I'd left it by the spring! There wasn't a thing in it, beyond a comb and brush, a bar of soap and a bottle of rose oil for the hair. I tore open my bag, hoping, in spite of my certain knowledge to the contrary, that I was wrong. But such wasn't the case. The kit was gone, lost in the trackless centuries of the past.

Our first thought was to retrieve it. But that wouldn't do. As fine as St. Ives' calculations were, we might as easily arrive a week early or a week late. We might appear, as I've said, while the cave painter was at work, and have to knock him senseless in order to squelch the news of our scissoring at the fabric of time. The universe mustn't get onto us, although, as I pointed out to St. Ives, it already had, due to my incalculable stupidity. St. Ives pondered for a moment. Returning would, quite likely, compound the problem. And there was our wagon, wasn't there? The universe hadn't gone so far afoul as to have eradicated our wagon. Surely the Romans had arrived after all. Surely the megatherium had nosed a sufficient quantity of roots out of the dirt to satisfy itself and the universe both. The toad had eaten his bug and all was well. The panic had been for nothing.

We turned, intending to dismantle the ship, to hoist it onto the wagon preparatory to returning to Harrogate via London. There on the wall before us was the cave painting—the likeness of the artist himself, the scattered beasts beyond. We stood gaping at it, unbelieving. I blinked and stepped forward, running my hand across the time-dried paint. Was this some monstrous hoax? Had some grinning devil had a go at the painting at our expense while we dawdled in pre-history?

The painting was wonderfully detailed—his broad nose, his overhung brow, his squinty little pig eyes. But instead of that troubled frown, his face was arched with a faint half smile that Da Vinci would have paid to study. His hair, in another lifetime shaggy and wild, was parted down the center and combed neatly over his ears. The artist had been clever enough to capture the sheen of rose oil on it, and the passing centuries hadn't diminished it. His beard, still monumental by current standards, was combed out and oiled into a cylinder like the beard of a pharaoh. My comb was thrust into it by way of ornament. He held my brush in one hand; in the other, gripped at the neck and drawn with reverential care, was the bottle of hair oil, tinted pink and orange in the dying sunlight.

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I fear that after the shock of it had drained the color from my face, I pitched over onto that same article and had to be hauled away bodily in the cart. The rest you know. The cave on the Salisbury plain is no more, and, happily, the tenuous and brittle fabrication of the universe isn't quite so tenuous and brittle after all. Or so I tell myself. With the cave went the great mass of St. Ives' evidence. His photographs were cried down as frauds—waxwork dummies covered in horsehair. He's planning another journey, though. He's found the foreleg of a dinosaur in a sandpit in the forest near Heidelberg, and he intends to compel it to spirit us back to the Age of Reptiles.

Whether I accompany him or stay in Harrogate to look after the tropical fish is a matter I debate with myself daily. You can understand what an unsettling thing it must be to teeter on the brink of bringing down the universe in a heap, and then to be snatched away at the last moment by the timely hand of Providence. And besides, I'm thinking of writing a monograph on the Crusoe matter—a little business regarding the civilizing influences of a good tortoiseshell comb. Desperate as it was, the incident of the toiletries bag has rather revived my interest in the issue. The truth of it, if I'm any judge, has been borne out quite nicely.

