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SCIENCE, now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at National Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts. Opinions expressed by authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the AAAS or the institutions with which the authors are affiliated. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 1740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. Furnish an address label from a recent issue. Give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. School year subscriptions: 9 months, \$7.00; 10 months, \$7.50. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

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A Mystery Story without the Mystery

The measurement of time was the subject of the latest, hour-long, TV program in the Bell System Science Series—"About Time," on view one evening earlier this month over NBC. In the mythical kingdom of Planet Q, where time is unknown, the King (played by actor Les Tremayne) asks a scientist (played by Frank C. Baxter) to tell him where to set the hands on the new throne-room clock. Before answering the question, Dr. Baxter finds it necessary, using documentary films and animated diagrams, to touch on many things, including the evolution of the calendar, techniques of timing down to billionths of a second, time sense in animals, and some of the lore of relativity theory. The information is graciously imparted to the King, who is ever amazed and ever willing to learn.

"About Time" is the eighth in the Bell System Science Series, which began in 1956 with "Our Mr. Sun." The format of the earlier programs is followed, but without some of the earlier attempts at comic relief. Thus, at one point in an earlier show, the man running the hidden film projector, confused by all the orders emanating from Dr. Baxter, suddenly emerged with his hair awry and his reels unwound. Actually, this proved funny, but it was also distracting. As an effort to reach children and the general TV viewer *with science*, the present show is quite an improvement. Some irrelevant business is still present, however, and it is present because something else is missing.

One view of scientific research is that it is like a detective story. Both the scientist and the detective start with a puzzle, discover clues, link them together, and then offer a solution. This view may be a stereotype but it also happens to be accurate, and the drama inherent in science is what is missing in the show. In consequence, to avoid a dry recital of facts and explanations, the producers of "About Time" found it necessary to offer their tale of Planet Q. The program does begin with a question about how to set a clock, but this is more a device to start the show than the first step in a scientific inquiry. To illustrate what is missing, let us take a famous detective story and give it the same treatment that the producers gave scientific research.

Take Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." The story begins with the discovery in a house in the Rue Morgue of two horrible yet astonishing murders. The corpse of a young woman is found forced a considerable distance up a chimney. The corpse of her mother is on the ground outside, her head almost cut off. The furniture in the house is smashed. A bloody razor lies on a chair. The police are getting nowhere until Dupin interests himself in the case.

In our special treatment, of course, we would not be content to tell only one Poe story, we would want to tell them all. But the portion of the program devoted to this story might, in its entirety, go something like this.

SCENE. *A college professor is explaining things to the straight man. Both are standing before a large screen. The professor flips a switch, causing a picture of an orangutan to appear on the screen.*

COLLEGE PROFESSOR (*pointing to screen*). An orangutan is the guilty party in this one. (*Turns off picture*) Who would have thought that one day one of these beasts would escape with its master's razor, enter a house in the Rue Morgue, and do in the two ladies who lived there when they resisted its efforts to play barber?

STRAIGHT MAN. Good heavens, not I!—J.T.