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FEATURED NOVELS

AS YOU WERE

By HENRY KUTTNER

THE WEARIEST RIVER

By WALLACE WEST

NEW BODIES FOR OLD

By JACK VANCE



A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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AS
YOU
WERE



AS YOU WERE

A NOVELET BY HENRY KUTTNER

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, August, 1950.

Illustrations by Virgil Finlay.

Peter Owen swings back to yesterday on a space-time pendulum in a frantic attempt to find a tomorrow worth living!

CHAPTER I

Blue Enamel Clock

Something was keeping Peter Owen awake. Either the coastal thunderstorm outside his bedroom window was distracting him, or his choice of reading material had been unwise. The book which Owen, propped up in bed, was reading, bore the revolting title of *New Uncoiled Gastropods From the Middle Devonian*, and had promised to be a relaxing change from last night's rather thrilling account of the Simpler Acyclic and Monocyclic Terpenes.

Peter Owen sighed and turned a page. Then he uncoiled nervously, like a gastropod, as a knock sounded on the door.

He called, "Come in," and looked up with some anxiety, relieved to see the short, plump, white-haired old gentleman who came stumping into the bedroom in response to his invitation.

"To myself, I say beer," announced the old gentleman, holding up a foaming glass. "Then I think, for a young man at bedtime—yes, Peter, you have guessed it. Beer."

With an air of triumph Dr. Sigmund Krafft allowed a smile to crease the imperturbable crumple of wrinkles he called a face. Owen, recalled from the life of the gastropod to the problems of his own somewhat more turbulent existence, took the beer with a vague blink. Then he remembered that Dr. Krafft was a guest in this house, though not his own. He prepared to get up.

"Why didn't you call me, Doctor?" he asked. "I'd have got you some beer. That's what I'm here for, after the servants leave for the night. Not that I mind. I mean—" He floundered slightly.

Krafft came to his rescue. "It was no trouble, Peter. I was thinking about next Tuesday. Next Tuesday night at this time I shall be in my own nice little study in Connecticut, all quiet and happy, and then I shall have a glass of beer. So I thought, Sigmund—yes, you have guessed it—I thought I would have a glass of beer now and imagine it was next Tuesday."

A crash, a thud and a loud outcry sounded from the floor below. The two men exchanged significant glances. Dr. Krafft shrugged a little. The outcry rose even louder and angry commands could be heard, muffled by the walls between and the noises of the storm outside. "Break, blast you!" the voice downstairs shouted. "Break!" Thuds followed rapidly.

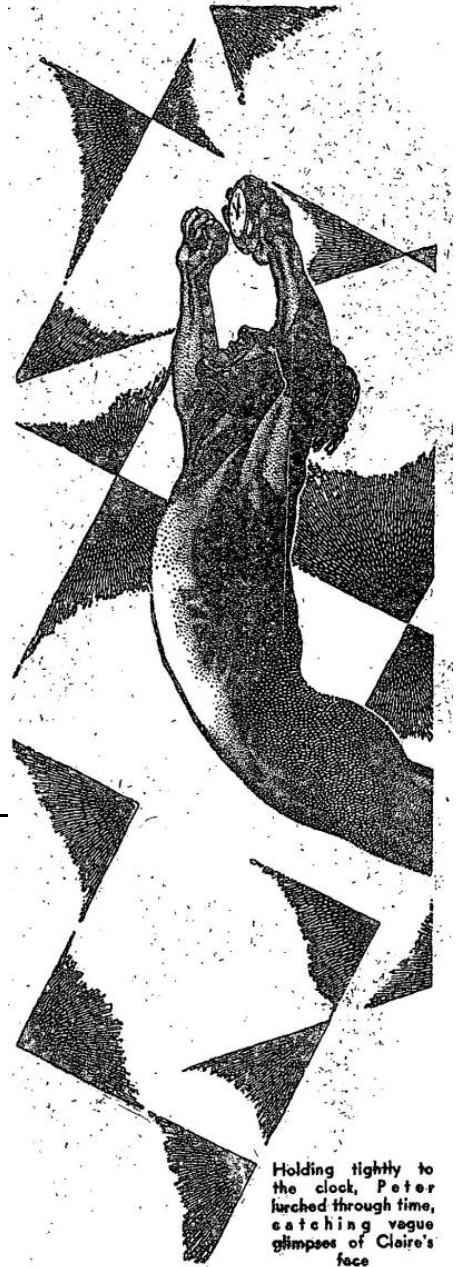
"The Shostakovich records," Dr. Krafft said. "Unbreakable, you know. Perhaps a hacksaw—still, no. Better to keep away until he feels happier. I

shall think about next Tuesday and forget all that trouble with your uncle, my boy. I am sorry we disagreed, but how could I say a space-time continuum is not cyclical when I know it is?"

"Break! Break!" cried the voice from below, and a renewed thud made the walls shiver slightly. The full weight of the world-famous C. Edmund Stumm, author, critic and playwright, had apparently come down flat-footedly upon the offending records. "Break!" his voice shouted Tennysonianly, but no obedient crackle of vinylite responded and Owen curled up a little with dread. C. Edmund Stumm, thwarted, was not a subject to think about unmoved.

"That young lady, your friend—she is a brave girl," Dr. Krafft said soberly.

Owen shuddered. Claire Bishop, fair and fascinating, was not so much brave as foolhardy. Also, she had a temper almost the equal of C. Edmund Stumm's. As a direct consequence, the indestructibility of vinylite was being tried to its last measure of resistance in the music room downstairs. Claire this afternoon, as a climax to a thoroughly disastrous interview with Uncle Edmund, had rashly expressed a preference for Shostakovich over Prokofieff. She thereby canceled completely all of Owen's desperate efforts of the past month to bring about an amicable meeting between the rising young screen



Holding tightly to the clock, Peter lurched through time, catching vague glimpses of Claire's face

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and the rising young screen

actress whom he adored, and the uncle whose famous Broadway play, *Lady Pantagruel*, might well have been written with Claire's special talents in mind.

Due to the curious convolutions of Hollywood reasoning, the role of Lady Pantagruel was what Claire badly needed just now. Her career was in serious peril. But Owen's painstaking arrangements went for naught after the fireworks started. Uncle Edmund had so nearly—so nearly!—signed the contract of sale, Owen remembered in anguish. Still, how could he blame Claire? He stared at the floor and wished that he were dead.

“—lost my dear Maxl,” Dr. Krafft was murmuring distractedly, peering about the room. “Now if you happened to notice where I might have put Maxl—”

“I beg your pardon, Doctor?” Owen said, recalling himself.

“I have lost poor Maxl,” Krafft repeated, sighing deeply. “Ah well, who is perfect? The trouble with time-experimenting is that you cannot always remember when you did something. To find Maxl I need quiet and concentration. But without Maxl, how can I concentrate?” He smiled. “A paradox! For me, a scientist, to be helpless without a little stone frog—you have guessed it, Peter. Absurd! Ah, well!”



He turned toward the door, shaking his white head. "Good night, Peter. If you happen to see Maxl, you will tell me?"

"Right away," Owen promised. "Good night, Doctor. Thanks for the beer."

“Of course it is only a habit and a fetich, but—” The door closed on his mild murmuring. In the same instant a flash of violet light and an appalling crash from outside brought Owen upright with a start. Automatically, somehow, he attributed the noise to his uncle’s ultimate success in smashing the records, perhaps with an atomic bomb. But vision instantly corrected that assumption.

Outside, near the edge of the cliff that jutted into the Pacific, a lone Monterey cypress stood outlined in a blaze of fire. As the lightning faded a new flash stood quivering in the sky, showing the cypress toppling headlong over the edge of the cliff.

Owen had an odd conviction that the cypress must somehow have offended his uncle. He sighed. Storms were no rarity at this season in the slightly famous little sea-coast resort of Las Ondas. Nor were storms rare in Owen’s life, which explains why he had schooled himself in the past six months to imitate the passivity of a lightning-rod.

He rather wished he could uncoil, like a gastropod, from what had become a cramping position in life, ever since, at his uncle’s insistence, he had quit his managerial job with a Hollywood commercial-film company and become Mr. Stumm’s private secretary. The glibness of his uncle’s promises had only stressed the fact that C. Edmund Stumm, himself, was one of the worst polecats in the state of California, which covers considerable territory.

Absently Owen fumbled for his beer. His eyes had gone back to the small print of his book, which dealt with what now seemed a lovely, unemotional, mild-tempered world in which the growth and reproduction of the slimy salamander plethodon glutinosus followed a calm, predictable course.

Have you ever picked up a glass of water, thinking it was milk or beer? Do you know that slow, incredulous moment of total disorientation as the surprise of it dawns upon your stunned taste-buds?

Owen took a long, satisfying drink of what he had every reason to expect was beer, chilled to exactly the right temperature by a special compartment in the refrigerator.

It was not beer.

But it was the most delicious, the most satisfying, the most incredible draught Owen had ever tasted in his life. Cool, shadowy, hollow, insubstantial as a breeze blowing from nowhere, the drink poured down Peter Owen’s throat.

Shocked into belated surprise, he lowered the beer-glass, staring. But it wasn’t a beer-glass.

He was holding a *clock*!

He had never seen the clock before in his life. Sitting bolt upright against his pillows, conscious of the wild drumming of rain on glass, and muffled thunder far off over the sea, he swallowed convulsively two or three times. He could still taste that incredible draught. Or could he?

His throat seemed to tingle slightly, and he had an extraordinary sense of well-being, amounting almost to giddiness. This passed instantly, to be lost in baffled disbelief.

He glanced from the clock to the bedside table. There sat his glass, white-collared above the amber beer, its sides frosted with trickling condensation. Perfectly convinced that he was going mad, Peter Owen stared at the blue enamel clock, turning it over in his hands, looking for some conceivable explanation. His taste-buds still tingled.

Or did they? He reached hastily for the beer and took a swig. There was no comparison. This was good beer, but only beer—not nectar. Quite obviously, you can't take a drink out of a clock. From a skull, perhaps, if you have morbid tastes, or champagne from a slipper—but a clock? What could one drink out of a clock if a clock could be drunk out of?

"Time?" Owen, wondered madly. "Time isn't a liquid. You can't drink time. I'm all keyed up. That's what it is. Imagination." He thought this over tentatively. "I was expecting to taste beer, so I *did* taste it—except that it didn't taste like beer. Well, that's natural. It wasn't beer. It wasn't anything. Just—a deep breath?" He puzzled over that, settling back slowly on his pillow. Then he sat up again abruptly, staring at the clock, as he realized suddenly that he had never seen it before.

He had a horrid suspicion that his uncle might have decided to give him an unexpected present. *Timeo Danaos*, he thought warily. Uncle Edmund never gave away anything. It might to the outward eye have seemed a gracious gesture to invite Dr. Krafft to Las Ondas for an extended seaside vacation, but the motives behind that were anything but gracious. Uncle Edmund was working on a sequel to *Lady Pantagrue* at the moment, and cunningly picking Dr. Krafft's brains in the process. *Lady Pantagrue*'s popularity was in great measure due to the good Doctor's contributions at the time of its writing two years ago. It dealt with time-travel, somewhat in the manner of Berkeley Square, and many of the best ideas in it had been Dr. Krafft's, though one would look in vain for acknowledgements on the playbill.

As for the clock Owen still held in his shrinking hand, if it were a gift from Uncle Edmund it was probably a well-disguised atom bomb. He examined it warily. Some kind of booby-trap, without a doubt. Had the trap sprung? Certainly *something* had happened, though surely he hadn't actually

drunk a liquid draught out of the clock. A sort of mass hallucination of the senses might momentarily have deceived him, but not for long. The thing was impossible. . . .

It was a small clock, not much larger than an old-fashioned turnip watch—rather like an oppressed lemon, Owen thought with some natural confusion—and it had a loud, penetrating tick. It had the usual two hands, and apparently it wasn't an alarm clock. Also, it was thirteen minutes fast.

Owen blinked at his own clock on the bureau, an electric model with the alarm set for seven. Thoughtfully he reset the blue enamel clock, turning back the black minute-hand to ten-forty in agreement with the electric dial. Gingerly he put the loud-ticking object on the bedside table, gazed at it suspiciously, and reached for his beer. . . .

There was no beer.

Owen gave a faint cry of dismay and surged sidewise, staring down at the floor. He remembered very distinctly having set the glass on the table a few seconds ago. Had it fallen off? There was no trace anywhere of beer or glass. With a fearful suspicion that his mind had finally snapped under the strain of living with his uncle, Owen flung his torso headfirst out of the bed and dangled upside-down (like Mr. Quilp, he thought with a shudder), praying that the glass had rolled under the bed.

It hadn't.

"Delusions of persecution," he said to himself, upside-down, dizzily thinking how odd the words looked. "Now I'm suspecting Uncle Edmund of stealing my beer. Oh, this is terrible. I can never marry Claire now. I couldn't pass on the stigma of insanity to our children." The blood rushed to his head as he hung like a bat, peering under the bed and dimly hoping this might be a therapeutic measure to restore his sanity.

Across the room and upside-down he saw the lower part of the door open, and a pair of gnarled feet in carpet slippers entered.

"Something is lost?" Dr. Krafft inquired mildly.

"Beer," Owen said to the feet. "I'm looking for a glass of beer."

"But in the wrong place," Dr. Krafft suggested. "To myself, just now I say beer. Then I think, for a young man at bedtime—yes, Peter, you have guessed it. Beer."

Owen wrenched himself back to a more normal position and sat up in bed staring at Dr. Krafft with a disorienting feeling that he had lived through this moment before. The old gentleman was holding out a foaming glass.

"I shall drink one too," Dr. Krafft said placidly. "And I shall imagine it to be next Tuesday, when I am back home. Only—Peter, I am afraid I have lost my dear Maxl."

“Again?”

Dr. Krafft peered at him mildly. “Well, I am absent-minded, Peter. Of course it is absurd to have such a fetich-habit. But I cannot concentrate on my discontinuum orientation unless I look at Maxl, you see. And the tesseract experiments must stop until I find him. So much of the work depends on absolute concentration before plenum-consciousness can be obliterated. Long ago I used an opal. But I got used to little Maxl, and now I cannot work without him. If you see him, Peter, please let me know at once.” Here he shook his white head gravely. “Ah well,” he said. “Good night, Peter.”

“G-good night,” Owen said, and watched Dr. Krafft depart, leaving Owen to consider the possibility that he wasn’t the only lunatic around here.

A flash of violet light and an appalling crash outside made him jerk around toward the window. Outlined in lightning, the lone Monterey cypress stood on the edge of the bluff. Apparently it had pulled itself together, crawled back up the cliff like a sprout from Dunsinane, and re-rooted itself just in time to disprove the truism that lightning never strikes twice in the same place. A second flash showed the dogged but doomed cypress again taking a nose-dive back over the brink.

“No, no,” Owen said in a low, mild voice of disapproval. Then he laughed quietly, but in what sounded to him like a slightly unhinged tone. “You’re a glass of beer,” he told the glass of beer. “And I’m a white rabbit with a blue enamel clock in my waistcoat pocket—no, what am I saying? Get a grip on yourself, Peter. You’re asleep, that’s all. Hang onto that thought. You can prove it. Put the glass down and watch it vanish.”

CHAPTER II

Over and Over

Impressed by the suggestion, he set the beer-glass down on the table and stared at it. Nothing happened. Lightning flashed. Owen glanced at the window. The cypress was still gone. On an impulse he looked under the bed again, half expecting to see the cypress. Nothing.

Straightening, he looked at the blue enamel clock. Its hands crept steadily on toward ten fifty-three, that erroneous hour from which he had corrected it. He was conscious of growing tension. At ten-fifty-three, he suspected, something might happen. . . .

It didn't. Baffled, he picked up the clock and compared it with the electric dial on the bureau. Yes—no—something had or hadn't happened. He wasn't sure which. But the electric clock said ten-forty. Thirteen minutes had passed since his re-setting of the blue enamel anomaly, yet the electric clock still said ten-forty. Had the electricity failed? No. The lights had not even blinked.

Owen thought for some while. Then he shook his head, turned from impossible speculations, and with a feeling of relief devoted himself to the prosaic duty of re-setting the blue enamel clock correctly. Hallucinations were all very well, but the electric clock remained stable in a world of wildly veering events. On that he pinned his whole faith as he turned the black hands of the enamel clock back until they agreed with the electric clock's hands, which by now indicated ten forty-five.

At the same moment, with a sort of jolt in the middle of his brain, he realized that the electric clock had changed its mind and now said ten thirty-two. Moreover a familiar voice was remarking, "Ah, well. Good night, Peter."

Owen looked around sharply. Dr. Krafft, shaking his white head, walked out of the room and closed the door behind him.

A flash of violet light made Owen turn toward the window as the door shut. He was just in time to see the indefatigable cypress on the edge of the cliff outlined in lightning before the persecuted tree fell over the brink again.

"Doctor!" screamed the terrified Peter Owen. "Dr. Krafft!"

He squeezed his eyes shut, dropped the blue enamel clock on the bed and fumbled blindly for his beer. Then he opened his eyes for fear he might blindly stick his hand into the open mouth of a goblin. When the beer-glass

was safe in his grip he shut his eyes again, moaned softly, and took a drink. The door opened. There was an ambiguous rustling sound.

After a long pause, Owen said without opening his eyes, "If you're Dr. Krafft, come in quick. If you're a cypress, I can't help you. Go away. That lightning bolt will only track you down again and then we're both doomed. Think yourself lucky you're a tree. You can't go mad. *I can.*"

"You could not get drunk that quick," Dr. Krafft said mildly. "Not on one beer!"

Owen opened his eyes, relieved at sight of the wrinkled face under the wild white hair. "One beer?" he said. "You've been bringing me beer all night."

He looked anxiously at Dr. Krafft's hands.

"Beer?" the Doctor said. "I?" He spread his empty hands.

"Well," Owen said weakly, "it seems that way."

"There is your beer," Dr. Krafft said. "Where I just set it down. Now I must go and find Max!"

"Doctor," Owen said hastily. "What time is it?"

Dr. Krafft looked at the electric clock, which now said ten thirty-five. The blue enamel clock looked up at them blankly from the wrinkled bed. It said ten forty-eight.

"Ten forty-eight exactly," Dr. Krafft said, referring to a wristwatch which had never been known to vary by a second. "Your electric clock is wrong. The power must have gone off today sometime. This storm." He shuffled to the bureau and reset the electric clock. Now it agreed with the blue enamel clock.

"Dr. Krafft," Owen asked desperately, turning the clock over in his hands, "I want to ask you something. Is it possible to travel in time?"

Krafft looked pensive. "We are all traveling in time, Peter," he said.

"Yes, I know, I know. But I mean really travel, into your own future or past. Has anyone ever actually done it?"

"How is one to tell?" Krafft asked, regarding him mildly. "It is proof I am seeking in my tesseract experiments. You know? I build a model of a tesseract—a cube exploded into four dimensions, symbolically—and then I try to free my mind from time-consciousness, so it can move freely through, paratime. I concentrate all the energy of the mind upon the tesseract. What *should* happen is that the energy moving through time strikes the tesseract and collapses it into a normal cube. Inertia is inertia, and mass is mass, spatially or temporally. But it is hard to prove, Peter."

"What would be proof?" Owen demanded. "If somebody found a way to take quick trips into ten minutes ago, how could he prove it?"

The aged savant shook his head and stared at Peter Owen doubtfully.

“Why would he want to do that, Peter?” Dr. Krafft asked reasonably. “To travel into the future—yes. One might achieve something. But you already know the past. Why relive it?”

“I don’t know *why*,” Owen said, shutting his eyes. “But I know *how*. This clock does it.” He opened his eyes again and stared wildly at Dr. Krafft. “I’ll set it back five minutes and show you!” he said. “No, wait. You do it. Turn it back five minutes and see what happens.”

“Now, Peter,” Dr. Krafft murmured.

“Here, try it!”

Blinking, Krafft accepted the clock and moved the minute hand back carefully. Nothing at all happened. Krafft waited. So did Owen.

Then Krafft returned the hand to its original point and gave Owen back the clock, regarding him inquiringly. Owen swallowed.

“But it happened,” he said desperately. “Look, all I did was—this.”

He turned the little knob on the back of the clock, watching the minute hand glide backward three minutes. . . .

“Good night, Peter,” Dr. Krafft said, walking out of the room and closing the door behind him.

Owen snatched for the brimming glass of beer he knew would be on the bedside table. Not a single swallow had been taken from it. Gulping wildly, he gazed with horrified eyes at the window, quivering with sympathy for the miserable cypress even now clambering back up the cliff to keep its appointment in Samarra. The inevitable lightning flashed. . . .

But now he hadn’t talked to Dr. Krafft about time-traveling at all. It hadn’t happened! How could he prove the clock was a time-machine? Apparently it affected only himself. Not only could no one else use it, but Owen couldn’t demonstrate without automatically erasing all Krafft’s memories.

Desperately Owen drained the beer-glass, threw it away, snapped out the bed-light and emulated a coiled gastropod by burrowing under the covers and thinking of nothing at all. He didn’t dare think. If he saw that wretched cypress take one more beating, he’d probably jump over the cliff after it. The whole thing was manifestly impossible, and in some inexplicable way he was drunk, dreaming, mad, or all three. He turned his mind off completely.

And after a long, long time, he fell asleep.

He had a curious dream.

It seemed he was a fish, lazing beneath a tropical sea. Far above him floated the shadow of a ship’s hull, oddly reminiscent of a large wooden shoe. Long rods extended downward from the shadow, searching the sea-

bottom slowly, like telescopes. Owen swam toward them. The water rushing through his gills reminded him of the strange, ineffable draught of time he had drunk from a blue enamel clock, when he was a man. That seemed a long time ago.

Adjusting his fins, he dived beneath the nearest rod and swam close, peering into what might have been a lens. He was gazing up directly into a large, intent, curious blue eye. . . .

He woke.

The blue eye was a square of clear blue sky outside the window. Owen lay looking at it, reluctant to take up the dark business of living. He was still dazed with his dream and he made feeble, flipping motions that should have sent him gliding smoothly out of bed. Presently he realized he was no longer a fish. He was Peter Owen, with fearful problems and a black future.

He sat up and began dreading the day before him. Life as Uncle Edmund's secretary had little to recommend it, now that all hope for acquiring *Lady Pantagruel* was dead. Uncle Edmund rejoiced in the worst possible relations with everybody he met. He even attempted now and then to quarrel with the placid Dr. Krafft, getting nowhere. With everyone else he could and did quarrel, and one of his secretary's more difficult jobs was smoothing down the enemy well enough to keep C. Edmund Stumm alive. Uncle Edmund was currently carrying on a deadly feud with Noel Coward, the Las Ondas Chief of Police and the local garbage collector. To all of these he gave his wholehearted attention.

This made life difficult for the middleman. But after today, Peter Owen would be middleman no longer. He might be dead—for to resign from Uncle Edmund's employ was to invite the lightning—but there are worse fates than death.

Owen gazed miserably out the window. The cliff was reassuringly bare of cypresses, which made, him feel a little better. "What a dream," he murmured. For it must have been a dream—two dreams, rather, one involving beer and cypresses and the other concerned with fish. There had also been a clock—or had there? He glanced at the bedside table. No clock.

"All a dream," he told himself. "Vivid, but a dream."

He was still telling himself this, not entirely with conviction, as he went downstairs to breakfast.

"You need not have been so prompt," Uncle Edmund said, looking up from his oatmeal with a vitriolic smile.

"Uncle Edmund," Owen said, taking a deep breath. "Uncle Edmund, shut up! I'm about to leave you."

He then held his breath and waited for the stroke that would disembowel him. . . .

And what was the trouble which had driven Peter Owen to this rash extremity? Claire Bishop was the trouble. You will all remember Claire Bishop in the film version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, with James Mason, Richard Widmark, Dan Duryea and Ethel Barrymore. In such distinguished company one would expect a newcomer like Claire to be quite overshadowed, but this did not happen. Everybody noticed and remembered her. She was that very pretty creature with the fluff of yellow curls and the ineffable switch to her walk, who drove up in the green convertible toward the end of Act Two. (You will recall that Hollywood took certain minor liberties with the original script.)

Claire's rise thereafter was meteoric, and so was her fall, due to a series of bad pictures ill-chosen, ill-cast and abominably written. In the depths, she met Peter Owen. Love burgeoned. And out of love, the rosy hope that with Peter's aid the impossible might be achieved and *Lady Pantagrue* purchased for Claire. In his spare time Peter Owen, fortified by love, moved mountains and rounded up a syndicate of backers who offered to put up the money for three pictures starring Claire if *Lady Pantagrue* could be wrested from C. Edmund Stumm's relentless grip as the first vehicle.

Could it? Peter had only to inquire. He inquired. C. Edmund Stumm, who loved nothing better than the whip-hand, would say neither yes nor no. He would and did say, however, that he needed a private secretary to do light work at a low salary. Perhaps, he hinted, if this private secretary caught him in a moment of weakness, he might even sign a contract relinquishing the film rights to *Lady Pantagrue*. . . .

Hence Owen's present degradation. The previous secretary had either gone mad or killed himself, he now knew. The line of demarcation between secretary and galley slave was regrettably faint, but Owen had bravely stuck it out, keeping Claire's fair face before his mind's eye and the possibility of a signed contract before Uncle Edmund's in all times and weathers.

Until yesterday, there seemed hope. But Claire—has it been mentioned?—had a temper too. Yesterday was one of those rare, halcyon days when C. Edmund Stumm mellowed by a series of lucky chances into near-humanity, went so far as to indicate that if Claire, her lawyer and the contract happened to convene in his library at a convenient moment, he might consider writing his name. . . .

The interview ended when Claire snatched a Prokofieff record off the phonograph and hurled it across the room, expressing a preference for Shostokavich, a distaste for C. Edmund Stumm's talents, and the intention of

dying by inches before she would play Lady Pantagrue under any circumstances whatever.

She then stamped out of the house, leaving Peter Owen's heart shattered with the shattered record, and Uncle Edmund's temper fanned to hitherto unparalleled heights of fury. Hence the assault last night on the unbreakable Shostokavich records. Hence Peter Owen's despair this morning. Hence, indeed, his reckless defiance of the tornado across the breakfast table.

Having taken a short swing through times past, though without the aid of a blue enamel clock, we step through the dining-room door and sit down at the table with Peter Owen, facing C. Edmund Stumm and annihilation. Now—if you will—go on with the story.

“Uncle Edmund—shut up! I'm about to leave you.”

Thus Peter Owen. Afterward he braced himself and wished he could shut his eyes. He didn't dare. It was better to watch Uncle Edmund closely in moments of crisis. And it was well he did.

Uncle Edmund was not a particularly rewarding sight. He looked like a wicked middle-aged cormorant, with sleek gray pinfeathers lying smoothly back along his head, and a pointed beak of a nose. His mouth was thin, small, precise and made for distilling vitriol.

He paused and looked up quite slowly as his private secretary's words echoed, perhaps with a slight quaver, upon the morning air. Uncle Edmund was pouring cream over his oatmeal. He held the cream-jug suspended over the bowl while he gazed at Owen with small, gimlet eyes that gradually suffused to a lively crimson as the full meaning of Owen's words gradually dawned on him.

“You are—*what?*” he demanded in a stifled voice, scraping his chair back slightly. “*What did you say?*”

“I said I'm about to—” Peter Owen began the words bravely enough, but he never finished them. Uncle Edmund hurled the cream-jug!

CHAPTER III

Robbery!

A long pale gout of cream smacked Owen neatly across the face. The jug crashed against the wall behind him and fell in fragments to the carpet. Dr. Krafft shook his white head mildly and sipped his coffee. Nothing could perturb Dr. Krafft.

Owen with a trembling hand mopped the cream from his face. What he might have done as soon as he could see again is a moot question. He thinks now he would have knocked Uncle's teeth in with a convenient plate. But he had no time. For Uncle Edmund's hearty laughter rang out above the buzz of rage in Owen's ears. Paper crackled.

"Look at this, you young nincompoop!" Uncle Edmund cried. "Wipe the cream off your stupid face and look at this!" And he laughed again, so merrily, so richly, that Peter Owen's heart sank like a plummet.

"This" was a contract. It was, in fact, Claire's contract for the purchase of *Lady Pantagruel*. Uncle Edmund was waving it like some succulent morsel under Owen's creamy nose.

"It may interest you to know, ingrate that you are," Uncle Edmund said in an acid voice, "that I got a letter this morning from Metro, definitely refusing to up their offer for *Lady Pantagruel*. Do you realize what that means? Oh no, of course not! How could you? It would take the I.Q. of a three-year-old to grasp it, so naturally—bah!" He thumped the table heavily, making the dishes dance. Dr. Krafft prudently picked his cup up just in time.

"I'll tell you what it means!" Uncle Edmund roared. "Miss Bishop's offer was the highest I've received. You know that. You saw to it. Snooping and prying among my private correspondence—" This was most unfair, Owen thought plaintively, "—reading my letters on the sly," Uncle Edmund stormed on, "you ferreted out what my best offer was. Then you saw that Miss Bishop topped it. Very well! A little decent family loyalty is all I ask. Loyalty to your own flesh and blood and the hand that feeds you. Too much to ask, you say? Yes, I suppose, it is too much, from a toad like you. So!"

Again he smote the table. "It was on the tip of my tongue when you came bursting in here like a mad tiger to ask you to phone Miss Bishop. I had reconsidered. I need the money, as who knows better than you, you low spy? If Metro won't up the offer, then I have no recourse. I support you in luxury, and luxuries cost money. I'm a poor man. Beset on every side!" Here

he glared at Dr. Krafft's mild, abstracted visage half eclipsed behind the coffee cup.

"Beset on every side!" he roared, maddened at the sight. "I was going to reconsider that termagant's offer. You hear me, Peter? If it hadn't been for your insults, I was going to grant your heart's desire!"

"Uncle Edmund—" Owen began. "Uncle Edmund, I—"

The sound of ripping paper interrupted him. Smiling fiercely, Uncle Edmund was tearing Claire's contract across. Laying the two halves together, he then tore them the other way. The quartered contract fluttered to his plate. Uncle Edmund picked up his half emptied coffee cup and poured its contents on the fragments.

"There!" he shouted, "There! Now you're sorry! Too late, my sneaking young friend, too late! Out you go! Now, this very second! Out of my sight! If you aren't packed and gone in fifteen seconds I'll have that nincompoop chief of police put you in irons. Go, go, go!"

And Owen went.

As he hastened from the room, he heard Dr. Krafft say placidly, "I had a most interesting dream last night. . . ."

He thought with anguish as he hurled shirts and socks into his suitcase,

"If *my* dream had only been real! If I could only turn the clock back far enough to get Claire's contract signed—"

At this moment a pair of socks coiled up like—you have guessed it—a gastropod, missed the suitcase and hurtled to the unmade bed. Owen saw them vanish down a blanket ravine, rummaged absent-mindedly, and felt his fingers close on something small, round, hard and cool. It ticked.

Face to face, he and the blue enamel clock turned blank stares upon one another. "Dream?" murmured Owen distractedly. "Dream? Then I *am* a fish?" and he looked down anxiously for fins. He had none. That much was still unreal. But here in his hand, ticking gently away, was the clock that had made last night an endless repetition of itself—unless he'd dreamed the whole thing.

"A backspacer," Owen thought frantically, shaking the clock in a senseless way. "It backspaced in time. The moving finger writes—" Quite of their own volition, his own fingers reached for the knob on the clock that turned the minute-hand. "It can't happen," he assured himself, even as he turned the hand. "It was all a dream. I know that. I'm no fool. But all the same, if it *would*—"

The clock had said nine-five before he turned it. Carefully he twirled the black minute-hand until the dial said eight fifty-five.

“Can I lure it back to cancel half a line?” Owen asked himself madly. “That’s the question. If I can—though of course I can’t—then everything’s dandy. I can unpack my suitcase and go right on downstairs to breakfast.”

Then he looked at the bed and said to himself blankly, “*What* suitcase?”

For it was no longer there. Shirts and socks had flown back into their nests by magic. The suitcase even now reposed on the top shelf in the closet. And from downstairs came the gentle clatter of dishes and the voices of C. Edmund Stumm and Dr. Krafft in cheerful morning converse.

Peter Owen dropped the clock in his jacket pocket, closed a trembling hand firmly over it, and went downstairs to breakfast. . . .

“You need not have been so prompt, Peter,” Uncle Edmund said with a vitiolic smile. “Sit down, sit down, since you’re here. Still, it’s bad enough having to eat oatmeal. When I have to look across the table at your porridge-face at the same time—” He shuddered ostentatiously and poured more cream from a miraculously renewed jug into his bowl.

“Good morning, Uncle,” Peter Owen said in a firm voice. “Good morning, Doctor. Did you find Maxl?”

Dr. Kraft shook his head sadly.

“Any mail, uncle?” Owen inquired with great cunning, forcing a smile.

“Don’t smile at me, sir,” Stumm said. “You merely increase the likeness to oatmeal by giving the impression it’s been sugared! No, there was no mail that concerns you.” Here he licked the cream off his thin lips and smiled as at a pleasant private jest.

“I have a job for you after breakfast,” he added, fixing Owen with a gimlet glance. “That pudding-head Egan who calls himself police-chief left a ticket on my car last night. Go down and fix it.”

Owen swallowed painfully. “But, Uncle, you know Egan won’t—never mind, I’ll pay the ticket.”

“Out of your own pocket?” Stumm demanded sharply. “Suit yourself. *I* won’t pay it. What good does it do me to be the first citizen, of Las Ondas if the Gestapo harries me night and day? I’ve brought more tourist business into Las Ondas since I bought this house than they had in their whole history before I got here. If Fred Egan thinks he can harass me with parking tickets simply because I left my car beside a fireplug all night, he’d better think twice. Go down directly you finish breakfast and take care of it, Peter. Crime rolls unchecked through this town while Egan creeps through the underbrush waiting for me to make some petty misstep. I’m above the law in Las Ondas!”

He paused and drank coffee fiercely.

“Are you *sure* there wasn’t any important mail?” Owen asked in a distracted voice. “I’d better go look. Maybe you missed something.”

“Sit down, sir! Do you take me for a fool like you?”

“Ah,” Dr. Krafft murmured placatingly. “Lovely morning, lovely morning. Last night, gentlemen, I had a most interesting dream—”

“Hum!” Uncle Edmund said abruptly. “That reminds me. So did I. Most interesting.” He regarded a piece of toast in his hand, sneered at it and hurled it into his mouth. Speaking around it, he went on. “This morning I am more inclined to give Dr. Krafft’s theories special credence. I myself had an odd, yet thoroughly convincing dream. Prescient, perhaps. I had a bird’s-eye view, as it were, of what Dr. Krafft might call the temporal plenum. It is spherical.”

“Ah,” Dr. Krafft said noncommittally.

“It is spherical,” Stumm repeated in a firm voice. “Like the celestial sphere. I was surprised, in my dream, to see what I took to be a wooden shoe come sailing toward me. In this vessel I observed a party of time-travelers from the distant future who were visiting this day and age to see with their own eyes the man whose name must have gone ringing down the corridors of time to their own era—namely, me.” He paused. “C. Edmund Stumm,” he murmured, smiling to himself, like a man pouring cream over his own ego.

“Curious thing,” he added presently. “Their anchor. Something odd about it.”

“What?” Owen inquired in an urgent voice. “Did you see it?”

Stumm gave him an angry glance. “None of your business,” he said. Then a look of yet deeper bliss stole across his features as he regarded his nephew. He touched his coat pocket with a loving hand. Paper crackled.

“By the way, Peter,” he said suddenly. “I’ve had an offer from Metro for *Lady Pantagruel*. They’ll pay five thousand more than your termagant friend offered me yesterday. I just thought you’d be interested.” He cleared his throat slightly. “In spite of Miss Bishop’s vile temper and worse manners,” he said, “I might just possibly reconsider my decision, *if* she can meet Metro’s generous price. Think it over, my boy.”

Owen looked at his uncle searchingly. In which *now* had he lied? Which tale was the true one? What ought he to do next? He was still debating the question when Dr. Krafft said in a gentle drone,

“My dream was much like yours, Edmund. Yes, you have guessed it. A schooner filled with time-travelers. Curious, eh? Essentially the same, though colored by our different personalities and interpretations. I dreamed that my tesseract-projection experiments were rising like bubbles to the surface of the paratemporal plenum, attracting the attention of our friends,

the travelers. You know, the anchor intrigued me, too. Now that I think of it, the anchor seemed to be swinging to and fro, like a pendulum. Of course it could swing no farther than twelve hours.”

Dr. Krafft paused, pondering. “Why of course?” he asked himself in a murmur. “Why did I say that? Part of the dream, no doubt. Time and space get confused so easily.” Here he sighed. “Dear Maxl,” he said. “With Maxl, I could work out the whys and wherefores. Without Maxl—” He shook his white head, a gentle scowl darkening his features. “In my last tesseract-projective session,” he said, “I am almost certain I penetrated through to the next adjacent temporal dimension. A *most* interesting new chain of ideas hovered at the very verge of my mind. Oh, Maxl, where are you!”

“Forget about Maxl,” Stumm said shortly. “You waste enough time on your experiments as it is. Remember, I have only three more weeks to get the rough draft of the new play finished. I’ll want your close attention this morning, Sigmund. Yesterday you spent the whole day nose to nose with that idiotic stone frog. Today we have something more important to consider—Act Three.”

“But the anchor!” Owen said plaintively. “I wish one of you could remember what it looked like. I wonder if—”

“The voice of the oatmeal,” Uncle Edmund said unpleasantly.

“Maxl!” Dr. Krafft exclaimed in a sudden, high voice. He leaped to his feet, his aged face illuminated with joy. “Yes, I have guessed it! I remember where I left Maxl! In your library, Edmund! Excuse me, I must go to Maxl!”

In a rapid shuffle he hastened across the room toward the library door. The beam of his own delighted face seemed to precede him like the beam of a flashlight. Stumm watched with a certain sardonic expression on his cormorant features that Owen found rather baffling.

“Uncle Edmund,” he said.

“Well?” This was an impatient snarl.

“I don’t believe Miss Bishop’s backers will raise their price again. But the sale could be closed at their top price if I could get her back today.”

“Edmund!” Dr. Krafft’s horrified cry from the library brought both men to their feet in alarm. “Edmund! Robbers! Thieves! Oh, my poor Maxl!”

CHAPTER IV

Time for Patience

The library was indeed a dreadful sight. Glass from a broken french door glittered on the carpet. Rain had soaked the curtains and shapeless smears of mud led across the wet rug toward a shattered wall-cabinet. Once it had been glass-fronted. Once it had held a singularly uninteresting collection of gold coins, property of C. Edmund Stumm. It was empty now.

Stumm's breath hissed dramatically through his teeth. "My coins!" he said, and rushed across the room toward the looted cabinet.

"Maxl!" the Doctor cried again in a distraught voice, rushing after him. But he went only as far as the huge desk, where he bent to pat an empty corner of that vast bare surface tenderly. "There he sat, last night. Now I remember. Oh, my poor Maxl, stolen! Edmund, we must get Maxl back or I am a ruined man!"

"Nonsense," Stumm said, staring at the cabinet. "My coins are gone—thousands of dollars' worth." He was grossly exaggerating though the collection did have some intrinsic worth and was heavily insured. "What would burglars want with a stone frog? Had he any real value, like my coins?"

"Only to me," Krafft told him sadly. "But I know he sat here last night. I remember clearly now. The burglars must have taken him, and I shall never think again."

"Peter," Stumm said coldly. "Hand me the phone."

"But Uncle Edmund," Owen said, glancing, at the wall behind the desk, where a medium-sized safe exhibited a steel circle let into the panels, "hadn't you better check up on everything first? Maybe the burglars took more than the coins. Shall I open the safe?"

"I said hand me the phone," Stumm repeated even more coldly. "No shilly-shallying, young man. For every moment we delay the burglars may be drawing farther away, beyond the reach of the police. Let that safe alone! You'd like to learn the combination, wouldn't you, my clever young friend? It may disappoint you to know there's nothing of any value in it—only papers. Now will you hand me the telephone, or must I fling up the window and shout for the police myself?"

Owen handed the instrument over in silence. There was a certain fierce satisfaction in Stumm's voice as he gave the mayor's number.

“Now we’ll see,” he muttered, waiting. “Now that great lummoX of a Police Chief will—hello, hello! Is that you, James? C. Edmund Stumm speaking. My house has been robbed.”

The telephone sputtered excitedly at this dramatic announcement.

“Chief Egan did it,” Uncle Edmund said in a firm voice. “Oh, I’m not accusing him personally. I don’t say he robbed me with his own butter-fingered hands. But crime has been running riot too long in Las Ondas, James, and this is the last straw. You know the trouble I’ve been having with that man. Egan has got to go!”

The telephone again sputtered.

“I don’t care if he has six *dozen* children,” Uncle Edmund snapped. “As Mayor of Las Ondas your job’s to protect the citizenry. This place is rapidly degenerating into a new Casbah. I refuse to let my name be connected with a dive as noisesome as the lowest quarters of Port Said.”

Expostulation from the telephone.

“No,” Stumm said finally, “Egan goes or I go, and that’s final. I warn you, James, I’m seriously thinking of moving. Choose between us. Egan’s persecuted me to the last ditch, and here I take my stand. Who sent a policeman to make trouble at four o’clock in the morning only last week, when I was giving a party? Egan. Who put a ticket on my windshield last night? Who tried to make me move along Sunday when I was parked in the middle of Main Street signing autographs? I tell you, James, it’s Egan or me. Take your choice.”

Firmly he banged the telephone down. When he met Owen’s anxious gaze he was beaming with unwonted geniality.

“Mark this day in red,” he commanded metaphorically. “My triumph over that oafish lumpkin is achieved at last.” He glanced at the gently mourning Krafft. “Nor can I feel too grief-stricken at Maxl’s departure. He took too much valuable time, far better devoted to me. I feel in fine fettle, Peter. It’s a beautiful day, the lark’s on the wing and I might even consider letting your Miss Bishop have my play, if she catches me in a good mood and controls her vicious temper. Are you sure those backers of hers have the actual cash ready to hand over?”

“Positive,” Owen declared, almost carolling. “Shall I telephone her?”

“If you like,” Uncle Edmund said graciously. “And if you think it worth while. When she crashed out of here yesterday I seem to recall a few ill-chosen remarks about preferring death to the role of *Lady Pantagruel*. Still, I feel kindly toward all the world today. Do as you think best. And Peter—make sure she brings a certified check.”

Chief Egan, a minor though in his way an important figure in the tale of Peter Owen, was large, pink-faced, kind-hearted and perhaps not *too* efficient. When Las Ondas was a wide place in the beach highway, he sufficed the town well enough. But his ways were still small-town ways. And he insisted quite irrationally on enforcing the laws of Las Ondas even on Las Ondas' most illustrious citizen.

Peter Owen met him at the door. Followed by three officers, almost the entire police force of Las Ondas, the chief came in awkwardly. Embarrassment seemed to strike him pink and helpless whenever he came within range of C. Edmund Stumm. He grinned anxiously at Owen.

"Hello, Pete," he said with a sigh of relief. "Thought Mr. Stumm might answer the door. What's the trouble?"

"Burglars," Owen said succinctly. "Come along, Chief—this way."

The library door was closed. Chief Egan turned the knob, found it recalcitrant, murmured, "Stuck, is it? Rain last night must have made the wood swell," and after an instant's tussle threw his mighty shoulder in a heave against the door, which shot wide open with the accompaniment of a sharp crack and a thud. A howl of rage followed instantly.

Through the open door the form of C. Edmund Stumm was revealed flat on his back, a notebook clutched in his hand and a frightful expression on his narrow face.

"Oh, golly," Owen said, hurrying past to lift his uncle from the carpet.

"Gosh," Egan gulped, turning very pink indeed. "I—uh—I'm sorry, Mr. Stumm. Were you coming out?"

"Yes," Stumm said after a long pause. He allowed Owen to help him to his feet in deep silence, while his face turned redder and redder with a sort of luxuriant fury. "Yes, Chief Egan," he said meticulously, brushing at his trousers, "I was coming out I had hoped to avoid all possible irritations today and concentrate on my work. In order to shun the very sight of your incompetent jowls, I decided to get my notes and clear out before you lurched into my library." Here he shook the notebook wildly in midair. Words temporarily failed him.

The cormorant glare shifted to Owen.

"And as for *you*," he said ferociously, suddenly shifting his attack, "if that termagant Bishop woman so much as sets her toe inside my house today I'll have her arrested for breaking and entering. The very prospect of hearing her loathsome voice makes me froth at the ears. I shall close the deal with Metro this very morning. Shut up, sir! Give this brainless buffalo what information he pretends to need. It won't do the slightest good. As for Miss Bishop, we will not discuss the matter. A man can endure just so much. After being assaulted with a door and flung halfway across my study—why,

the man's no better than a murderer! Out of my sight, both of you! And take your Gestapo with you. Quick, before I lose my temper!"

Hastily Owen drew the policeman into the library and closed the door. From the hall extension he could hear Uncle Edmund's voice acidly demanding Long Distance. Chief Egan, crimson-eared, lumbered forward to examine the looted cabinet, but Owen had little attention to spare. He was listening to Uncle Edmund rapidly putting his call through, getting his man and saying loudly, for the benefit of any eavesdropping ears,

"So it's a deal, Louis, *Lady Pantagrue* is yours. You can send your lawyer down this afternoon with the papers."

Peter Owen laughed wildly.

"That's what you think, C. Edmund Stumm," he said aloud.

The blue enamel clock was in his pocket. He took it out and turned the minute hand back. . . .

"Hello, Pete," Chief Egan said with an anxious glance past Owen into the hall. "Thought Mr. Stumm might answer the door. What's the trouble?"

"Burglars," Owen said, as before. "Come in. But *be careful*. Here, let me go first."

The library door was closed. Also, it had stuck slightly. Fending off the chief's clumsy offers to break it down, Owen knocked meticulously.

"Uncle Edmund," he called. "Chief Egan's here."

"Bring him in, bring him in," the voice of Uncle Edmund said testily.

"Stand back," Owen called. "The door's stuck."

Egan burst the recalcitrant door open. Stumm, clutching his notebook, glared at Egan and appeared to steam slightly.

"Morning, Mr. Stumm," Egan said, blushing. "Hear you had a little trouble last night."

"I had no trouble," Stumm observed acidly. "Nor do I expect to. That's what insurance companies are for."

"Those coins of yours, eh?" Egan said, his gaze searching the room. "That all that's missing? What about the safe?"

"I have just checked it, thank you," Stumm told him with lofty disdain. "Credit, me with a modicum of good sense in handling my own affairs. The contents—papers valueless to anyone but me—are untouched. In my opinion the burglars were the veriest amateurs, since they made no discernible attempt on the safe. But even an amateur is perfectly safe in committing the vilest depredations under your nose, sir!"

So saying, he swung up his notebook and pointed accusingly at the chief, who stumbled backward, blundered into a corner of the desk and knocked a fluorescent lamp crashing to the floor.

Stumm's shriek of fury faded away into a long, diminishing wail as Owen snatched out his clock again and set the minute hand back. . . .

This time a full ten minutes elapsed before Egan trod heavily on Stumm's toe as they stood together examining the cabinet. The outraged playwright was screaming for arnica, X-rays and a bone specialist as Owen, sighing deeply, erased him.

But he did not set the clock back a mere five minutes. For he saw now that the odds against a peaceful outcome to this particular set-up were hopeless. Stumm and Egan simply could not occupy the same house for longer than a few minutes without flying into conflict. It just wasn't worth the effort of trying to anticipate trouble before it burst out between them.

Nor could Egan be sidetracked, so long as there was a burglary to solve. The answer seemed obvious. Sometime during the night's storm, burglars had broken in the french door, looted Uncle Edmund's coin collection and presumably made off with Maxl at the same time. All Owen had to do to make everyone concerned happy—except, of course, the thieves—was to slip backward in time, discover the hour of the crime, and thwart it. Wishing he had thought of this sooner, he reached for the knob of the clock. At the moment it declared a rather tentative ten o'clock in the morning. Recklessly Owen twirled the hands backward. . . .

Jolt.

The knob would turn no more. Owen paused, chiefly because he could no longer see the face of the clock. It was not ten of a sunny morning any more. It was somewhere in the dark of a stormy night. He stood in total darkness, listening to the drum of rain and the distant sounds of Prokofieff's *Scythian Suite* from the music-room. A gust of wet, chill air blew in his face out of the darkness. Fearing the worst, he groped across the library to the fluorescent desk-lamp, and in the rather ghastly blue daylight of its illumination saw that he had come too late.

Under cover of the storm, the burglars had come and gone. The windows lay shattered on the carpet, mud splotched the wet floor and the glass-fronted cabinet was broken and empty. No Maxl squatted on the desk. Clearly the burglars had swiped dear little Maxl along with the coins.

The blue clock in his hand assured Owen with a bland-faced stare that it was ten in the evening. He shook it slightly and tried the knob again, wondering why it had stuck. He could move the minute hand back, but no more than about fifteen seconds. The only result was to plunge the library into darkness again and backspace the *Scythian Suite* a dozen bars.

Patiently Owen turned on the fluorescent once more and considered the clock. "So you won't turn back past ten," he said thoughtfully. "Why?"

Then something Dr. Krafft had remarked during one of this morning's breakfasts returned to him from infinitely far away. "The anchor," Dr. Krafft had said, "seemed to be swinging to and fro, like a pendulum. Of course it could swing no farther than twelve hours."

"Anchor?" Owen demanded, shaking the clock again. "Are *you* an anchor? A pendulum? And twelve hours is your limit, I suppose."

The cold breeze from the window made him shiver. He glanced around the looted library uncertainly. He couldn't prevent the burglary unless he went farther back in time than the clock seemed willing or able to take him. Besides, if he were found here he wouldn't put it past Uncle Edmund to have him arrested for burglary.

He twitched at the clock-hands tentatively. Until now he had had no chance for experimentation. If he turned it forward, would he leap ahead through time, back to tomorrow morning—using the clock's tabular key, as it were, instead of the backspacer?

No. He turned the hand ahead, without result. The rain still blew through the broken window. Prokofieff never altered a beat. Even without the thunderstorm the burglars could have broken the window unheard, Owen thought, and morosely left the rifled library.

Rather hopelessly he went upstairs to his own bedroom, curious to see what he would find. The bed was freshly made. On the table beside it stood nothing, not even a glass of beer. Naturally enough, since Dr. Krafft hadn't brought him any beer until nearly ten-forty last night—*last* night? Or now?

"That," Owen told himself, "is a problem for Dunne. If you need a Time Two to measure Time One in, you'd need a whole new language for what I'm doing now."

Lightning flashed, and outside appeared the recrudescient cypress, valiantly in place again on the edge of the cliff.

"Cypress redivivus," Owen said with a moan. "Oh, no, not again!"

He glanced up at the black sky above it, as though half expecting to see the hull of a funny-looking schooner hovering in mid-air, and thought worriedly that three people can't dream the same dream by coincidence. And it *was* the same dream.

CHAPTER V

And Patience With Time

Peter looked around the room in discouragement. What next? Backward he could not go, obviously. Forward again seemed the only way, and that apparently had to happen in the usual, minute-by-minute process of ordinary living. So he had tonight to live through, dream and all (would it be the same, supposing he slept?), and afterward breakfast, Egan's arrival, and uncle's vindictive call to Metro and the ultimate loss of *Lady Pantagruel*.

Must it happen exactly as before, or could the past be changed? Of course it could be changed. He'd changed it. Originally he hadn't gone into the library at ten o'clock. But in its essentials, was it alterable? He hadn't done very well in trying to stop a clash between Uncle Edmund and Egan.

Lightning flared, and the doomed cypress tossed its branches wildly at the cliff-edge. In ten minutes—he glanced at the clock—the wretched tree would get it again. In about eight minutes Dr. Krafft would enter with the beer and the query for Maxl.

Krafft was the man. *He* could explain all this if anyone could. He might even help to work out a solution, except that—Owen sighed—he wouldn't believe the tale. Last night—this night—Owen had tried to show proof enough to engage the scientist's attention, and it couldn't be done. Not without automatically wiping out all the necessary memories from Krafft's mind.

"A lot of good *you* are," he said to the clock, shaking it again and remembering the Mad Hatter in the same moment. For an instant he had a perfectly horrible feeling that this clock in his hand was the identical clock which the Mad Hatter had taken from his pocket and consulted, with many shakings, to learn what day of the month it was. "'If you'd only kept on good terms with Time,'" the Mad Hatter said, and he must have been an authority on the subject, "'he'll do almost anything you like with the clock.'" It had been butter—the *best* butter—that stopped that particular clock. A lubricant.

"Is that what happened to me?" Owen inquired of the empty air. "When I—drank—out of the thing? A sort of lubricant, that makes me frictionless in time? But *where did it come from?* What *is* the clock?"

Then he thought of the three dreams about the schooner shaped like a wooden shoe, and the fishermen probing the depths of time while they swung at anchor upon—what? This clock? Something clock-shaped to look

like a normal thing here at the sea-bottom, but not a clock at all. . . . Mustn't frighten the fish.

"This," Owen thought in sudden panic, "could be dangerous. I've got to talk to Dr. Krafft!"

"To myself, I say beer," the elderly savant declared, holding up a foaming glass. He paused in the doorway, beaming placidly. "Then I think, for a young man at bedtime—what is this, Peter? Still up?"

"Dr. Krafft, I've got to talk to you!" Owen took the glass from his hand and pulled a chair forward. "Please sit down. Listen, Doctor. It's about time travel. I mean, something's happened. That is, I've got to prove to you that there is such a thing as time travel."

"You have got to prove to *me* that there is such a thing as time travel?" the astounded old gentleman said, slightly stunned. "Why in the world do you suppose I have devoted the major part of my life to experimenting on this subject? No, Peter, it is good of you, but you do not have to prove it to me. You have guessed it, my boy—I am convinced already."

"You don't understand," Owen said wildly. "Look—it's exactly ten thirty-eight now, isn't it?"

"Yes, so it is. Why do you carry that clock around?"

"Never mind. You know that cypress out on the point, beyond the terrace? Well, in exactly three minutes that tree's going to be struck by lightning and fall over the cliff."

"Ah, I see," Dr. Krafft murmured with surprising calm. "In three minutes?"

"You aren't surprised?"

"After my years of experience with prescient dreams?" Krafft inquired infuriatingly. "No, I am not surprised. You dreamed the tree would be struck, eh? So, I will make a note of it."

"I didn't dream it!" Owen cried. "It happened. I saw it happen. Over and over I saw it."

"A recurrent dream? That is usually the most interesting of all."

"Every tonight at ten-forty the cypress gets hit by lightning," Owen said in a low, despairing voice. "Nobody cares. Nobody but me."

"Of course I care, Peter," Dr. Krafft said encouragingly. "See, I have made a note of it. At ten-forty we will watch. I will give you a footnote in my next book, perhaps. But one thing at a time."

"One thing at a time," Owen murmured, and laughed a hollow laugh.

"Eh? First, Maxl—my little Maxl. Yes. I have lost Maxl."

"Maxl has been kidnaped," Peter said swiftly. "Never mind. Maybe I can find him for you. Maybe I can stop the kidnapers before they ever happened,

if you'll only listen. Please sit down. Now. Dr. Krafft—"Owen made his voice impressive. "I've lived through this night once already. More than once. I lived straight through to ten o'clock tomorrow. Then I jumped back to ten tonight. Now I'm on the escalator of normal time being carried forward, and I can't move the clock's hands back past ten." He looked despairingly at Krafft. "If you can't help me," he said in a piteous voice, "I'm ruined."

Of all this, however, Krafft heard only the name of Maxl. Normally he was a kind old man, much concerned with the troubles of his friends, but we all have our personal phobias, and we know Dr. Krafft's.

"Maxl, kidnaped?" he demanded, springing from his chair. "When? How? Tell me at once Peter!"

"Burglars broke into the library and looted Uncle Edmund's safe," Owen said somewhat tiredly. "Maxl was sitting on the desk. At least, you seemed pretty sure he was. They took him. Why, nobody will ever know unless I can turn the clock back past ten o'clock."

"You have guessed it!" Dr. Krafft cried in an excited voice. "Now I remember! I *did* leave Maxl on Edmund's desk this morning. He was scolding me because I could not think of some foolish dialogue for his foolish new play, and I was trying to collapse a tesseract-form into a cube through a new time-dimension in my own mind. So naturally, I was thinking of Maxl—yes, yes! Thank you, Peter! I must hurry right down."

"Don't," Owen urged him. "I just came from the library. Maxl's gone. So are uncle's gold coins. The burglars had got there before ten, you see."

"Gone! And you said nothing? But Peter, Peter, we must act! We must call the police, before the burglars who took Maxl get too far away!"

"Wait, Dr. Krafft. Please listen a minute. I tell you, I've lived through all this before and I know! The best way to get Maxl back is to prevent his being stolen at all. If you'll only listen to me, maybe we can figure out a way to turn the clock back past ten, and everything will be perfect."

"Peter, Peter," Dr. Krafft murmured sadly, "I fear I was carrying coals to Newcastle when I brought you a drink tonight. Go to bed, my friend, and sleep. Tomorrow when your head is clearer we will talk. Just now, I must go!"

Lightning outside the window made the black panes burn violet for an instant. There was an ominous crack of cypress limbs accepting the stroke of destiny once more. Then the second flash, exactly on schedule, revealed the tree toppling with a resigned, fatalistic lurch over the cliff.

"Ah?" Dr. Krafft said on a rising inflection, glancing at the clock. He took his notebook from his dressing-gown pocket and scribbled briefly.

“Ten-forty exactly. Most interesting, Peter. Most interesting! Your dream was quite accurate. Of course we must allow for the laws of coincidence.”

“Dr. Krafft, do you remember your dream last night?” Owen demanded, “About the time-travelers and the ship?”

Krafft blinked inquiringly. “Last night? No.”

Owen clutched his head. “No, no, no! I’m sorry! My mistake. You haven’t dreamed it yet. That’s for tonight and it hasn’t happened yet. Angels and ministers of grace, defend us, isn’t there any way to convince you?”

“Peter,” Dr. Krafft said with mild solemnity. “Sit down. There on the bed. That’s right. Pile the pillows up. Be comfortable, my boy. Now, you see? I sit down here. I too am comfortable. Poor Maxl will wait. We must get to the bottom of this. Tell me, please, what is on your mind.”

Owen told him.

“May I see the clock?” Krafft asked when the story came to its end. Silently Owen handed it over. Krafft examined it carefully, scratched without effect at the blue enamel, shook it, listened to it, compared its dial with the electric clock. Then he pinched the knob on its back and twirled the hands easily and smoothly back past ten, past nine, past eight. He looked up.

“You see?” he murmured to Owen. “You see?”

“Of course I see,” Owen said with deliberate patience. “Anyone can do it but me. I proved that to you once before, tonight. *I* can’t do it, though.”

“Try,” Krafft urged, holding out the clock.

“Oh no! I don’t want to wipe out everything that’s happened tonight up to ten. Look, Doctor. Call it hypothetical if you have to. But given that premise, won’t you *please* try to work out an explanation for me? Hypothetically!”

“Hypothetically,” Krafft murmured with an infuriating mildness, “you have indeed a most interesting paradox. I must confess it all holds together very convincingly—if one accepts the single impossible premise of the clock. I should like to write it all down, later, as a nice problem in temporal logic. But later, later, when I find Maxl again. Now, I cannot really concentrate.”

“Try!” Owen urged him. He held out an empty hand, palm up. “Imagine Maxl’s sitting on my hand. Look at him. Think!”

Dr. Krafft’s faded blue eyes gazed interestedly at empty space, becoming slightly crossed as he focused on an intangible Maxl.

“*If* there were a schooner full of time travelers,” Owen prompted him desperately. “If they dropped anchor—hypothetically, symbolically, not literally—and the anchor *looked* like this clock, and my story were a problem you had to solve, what would occur to you?”

“I would say first,” Dr. Krafft murmured, still gazing fixedly at the unseeable Maxl, “that the clock has no seams anywhere. Have you observed that? The average clock has many cracks left after assembly, so that one can tell how it was made. This is all one piece. A new method, no doubt. Some way of casting that leaves no joints or seams. However, hypothetically, let us consider.

“Now, clocks are most interesting relics, in a way, of the ancient Chaldean, Egyptian, and kindred mathematical systems. So are compasses. These two things represent almost the only vestigial remnants in our own society of the old sexagesimal mathematics, founded on sixty instead of ten, like our decimal method. So that actually, both space and time are still measured in the ancient way. So it strikes me that for travelers in time to cast out a space-anchor in the likeness of a clock would seem not entirely nonsensical. Eh, Maxl?”

The white head shook impatiently. “No, no, it *is* nonsense. And there is no Maxl.”

“Go on, Doctor,” Owen urged. “You’re doing fine. If the clock were a temporal anchor, then what? That draught I drank—or thought I drank—does it suggest anything to you? A sort of temporal lubricant, like the best butter?”

“When I have Maxl,” Krafft said, “and I concentrate closely with his help, I sometimes succeed in letting my consciousness slip free from this continuum of space-time, as if—as if there were a certain reorientation in a direction that has no equivalent in space. As if I were frictionless, if you like, in time. Now if one accepts as a hypothesis that you did somehow absorb from the clock a draught of some lubricant—it does not make much practical sense, of course—one result might be that you, and only you, are so geared to the clock that you are pulled backward in time by it when you reset the hands.”

“As if the anchor were dragging?” Owen suggested with interest. “Maybe the schooner’s drifting backward in time too, and whenever I reset the hands, the anchor slips and drags into the past. I wonder if they’re noticing it?”

Krafft chuckled. “Mixing a temporal lubricant would not be easy, my boy.”

“No, of course not. But you know the fluid clutch? You mix up millions of tiny iron-particles with oil, and when you magnetize the iron the oil freezes solid until it’s released again. What if I drank something like that?”

“Then you would remain fixed solid in normal time until you turned the clock back, releasing yourself from time, allowing the anchor to drag you back. Yes. I can visualize that. Do not, however, confuse time with space,

except to remember that duration is as vast as space, perhaps vaster. Whatever keeps us embedded in our normal time-plenum, we should be grateful to it. To be frictionless in time might be very dangerous. Only inertia would keep one from slipping off into past or future or cross-time parallels. Most awkward! The slightest push from anything else that happened to be moving through time with you might send you hurtling away.”

“But what could?”

“Well, your schooner might, if you collided with it. Or another time-traveler, which isn’t likely. You must consider the sea upon which that schooner might float as a—a sort of paratime as distinct from the serial times which we live in and perceive in prescient dreams and in memories. When you are frictionless in time, as you are while the clock turns back, and of course I speak hypothetically, my boy—then you are at the mercy of any casual traveler through paratime who may collide with you and send you sailing off helpless, unable to get any traction to stop yourself. I advise you to look out for time-travelers.”

“Like a rocket-ship in space,” Owen murmured. “That’s not important, though. Look here, Doctor—*why* can’t I get back beyond ten o’clock? If twelve hours is its limit, and I suppose it has to be with this sort of numbering on the dial, why can’t I turn it now to twelve hours ago as of right this minute?”

“Because you aren’t existing now, obviously, my boy,” Krafft assured him. “Hypothetically, hypothetically, of course. You have not really cheated time. You follow your normal progression through paratime, as the planets follow theirs through space, though still revolving in their orbits and on their axes. I would assume, from the data at hand, that you obey immutable laws by existing legally, as it were, in tomorrow morning at the hour of ten, when you turned back the clock. It returned you—hypothetically—to ten tonight.”

He nodded at the blue clock Owen held.

“If we remain inside our hypothesis, Peter, we might draw all sorts of wondrous inferences from the way that clock is sealed. Arbitrarily we consider a clock a collection of cogs geared to measure time. Inside that clock we might, if we were to open it, find something very different indeed. The space-time plenum, my boy, is basically a matter of frequency, which reminds one irresistibly of the atomic clock, with its monitoring oscilloscope. *That* operates on quantum transition, as you no doubt know. The symmetric output pulse is produced by the absorption-line frequency of ammonia gas absorbing control signals, so the clock has a potential accuracy of something like one part in ten billion. It tells time, Peter, by the

movements of atoms themselves. Frequency, you see! It all fits very neatly together—in hypothesis. A clock is precisely what your time-travelers might well toss overboard for an anchor, a device which could be set to a particular space-time frequency so they would not slip off for lack of friction while they study.”

“You dreamed,” Owen informed him, “that they were studying the bubbles your tesseract-experiments sent up to the surface of the sea.”

“No doubt, no doubt,” Krafft murmured.

“But Doctor, you did! Wait. Tonight you’ll dream it.”

Krafft laughed gently. “I should not be surprised if I did, Peter, after this very interesting talk. But you and not I would be its originator!”

“*They’re* the originators,” Owen said stubbornly, glancing up as if toward the hull of the hovering ship. “From the future, I wonder?”

“Perhaps natives of paratime itself,” Krafft suggested in an indulgent voice. “Perhaps they exist only in absolute time, like deep-sea creatures. One might imagine that the pressure of normal time could crush them, as deep-sea pressure would crush a man. Except that the compacting would have to occur through time—they would be squeezed into an instantaneous existence, like mayflies.” He chuckled. “Perhaps that is what mayflies are, Peter—compressed time-travelers, their whole lifetimes crushed together into a day!”

“If *my* whole lifetime isn’t going to be crushed,” Owen said, “I’ve got to get back past ten o’clock and stop that burglary. I’ve got to do it, Doctor!”

“My boy, you cannot,” Krafft said flatly. “Even if your little blue clock were the anchor and the time-vehicle you suggest. If I were you, I would try to make use of it in some better way, such as preventing Edmund from discovering what you cannot prevent from happening. That is my solution to your very interesting hypothetical problem.” He got up stiffly. “And now, my boy, I shall go down and get Maxl.”

“Maxl’s gone.”

“Ah! Well, we shall see. Tomorrow we may find the burglary too a part of your very interesting dream.”

“But the cypress!” Owen said excitedly. “It’s the only bit of proof I had left, but it at least paid off. You saw it!”

“Peter, my boy, I did see it. I congratulate you on experiencing a most interesting prescient dream. But no more than that. You are tired, my boy. You are over-excited. So I suggest—yes, yes, you have guessed it, Peter. You had better drink your beer and go to bed.”

“I’m tired of going to bed!” Owen said in a desperate voice. “Besides, I might wake up yesterday. The time-travelers might catch me. Maybe they’re just fishing for a shore dinner.”

“Drink your beer,” Krafft said in his imperturbable voice. “I thank you for telling me where to find Maxl.”

“If he isn’t there,” Owen said, clutching at straws, “will you believe me? If you find burglars actually did break in, will you believe?”

“But Peter, you speak of an accomplished fact. If it happened at all, it happened before ten tonight. Quite so. Then where does time-travel enter? If you say you were down there and saw the broken window, I will believe you. But you needed no magic clock for that. You should have notified your uncle, not sat down with me to spin eccentric tales. No, no, you are over-excited, Peter. I must go now. Indeed, I must go.”

He turned toward the door.

Owen sighed and picked up the clock. He didn’t want to do this, but he had no choice. The good Doctor would find the looted safe, summon Uncle Edmund and the police, and Uncle Edmund’s rage would know no bounds.

“Good night, Doctor Krafft,” Owen said calmly, and turned back the hands of the clock.

CHAPTER VI

Sponge Out the Past

Later Peter went to bed. Eventually he slept, his head seething with useless plans and thoughts so complex as to defy description. He had a distracting dream.

A flying saucer was drifting on the surface of an odd-looking ocean where the waves looked unaccountably like minutes, though how he recognized the likeness he didn't know. Aboard the saucer were three time-travelers named Wynken, Blinken and Nod, and they were all sea-sick.

At intervals they staggered to the anchor-chain and tried feebly to pull it up. The chain kept swaying and twitching wildly.

Aside from the obvious fact that the three kept coiling and uncoiling like gastropods, the time-travelers were utterly indescribable.

The next morning—so to speak—Owen woke with a much clearer head, but a sense of doom hanging over him which made him feel like a cypress. It was very early. The thin, gray air of a seaside morning, salt-smelling with a hint of lemon-flavored sage from the hills inland, filled the room with complex odors.

Owen sat up in bed and thought.

“Doom?” he asked himself inquiringly. “Why?”

And the answer came to him. Those time-travelers, at the anchor-chain, hauling up the anchor. He snatched swiftly for the blue clock, and as swiftly let it go, fearful of being whisked through the ceiling into paratime in the wink of an eye.

“It isn't really true, of course,” he assured himself. “They aren't actually seasick. We all colored those dreams we had about them by our own personal warps. I must be worrying about the anchor-slip that happens whenever I jump back in time. But can I be *sure* they aren't pulling up the anchor? This clock isn't a gift. Probably a loan at best, and they may take it back any minute.”

That was the sense of impending doom. He could lose the clock at any time. And he had come to depend on it. No human agency could possibly unravel the awful skein of his dealings with *Lady Pantagruel*, Uncle Edmund, Chief Egan and Claire. Even with the clock he wasn't sure how he could accomplish anything.

“Oh!” Peter Owen said suddenly, and sat up even straighter.

Of course he could accomplish something. He could accomplish everything, if he worked fast and kept his wits about him. And he'd have to work fast. Wynken, Blinken and Nod might decide to up-anchor and go home before he got his plan under way.

Dr. Krafft had given him the clue, after all. Past ten last night he could not go, but the purpose was to thwart the burglars, and if Uncle Edmund didn't discover the burglary until the sale of *Lady Pantagrue* could be arranged to Owen's satisfaction, then the same end would be accomplished.

Owen blinked excitedly at the gray air of early morning. Presently he would go down to breakfast. Presently Uncle Edmund—unless time had changed more than seemed likely—would insinuate that Claire's offer for *Lady Pantagrue* might be acceptable. Then was the time to strike, while Uncle Edmund's mood stayed comparatively plastic.

Somehow Owen would have to keep the robbery secret. Somehow he would have to muzzle Doctor Krafft whenever he seemed about to remember Maxl in the library. Chief Egan had to stay out of the house and Claire had to come in!

In robe and slippers, moving silently through the silent house, Owen hurried downstairs to the hall telephone. He had a nervous feeling that he might pass himself somewhere in paratime, and a definite neurosis about the chances of finding Peter Owen in bed and asleep when he went back to his room. But he managed to get a call put through to Claire Bishop's apartment in Los Angeles without any major slip-ups.

The phone rang a long time.

"Hello," Claire's cross and sleepy voice said, at the end of several interminable minutes. "Hello—*Peter*? What on earth do you mean, waking me up at dawn?"

Hastily Owen spoke. "Now darling, pull yourself together. I couldn't stand another scene, after yesterday. Take a deep breath and keep your temper. Okay?"

Hesitating between anger and fondness, Claire laughed uncertainly.

"I want you to get dressed right away and wake up your lawyer and come down to Las Ondas," Owen went on rapidly.

"Peter, you're mad!"

"Don't argue, darling. You'll never know what I've been through since yesterday. I can get *Lady Pantagrue* for you if you do exactly as I tell you."

"I hate *Lady Pantagrue*!" Claire declared passionately. Owen could picture, as via television, her fluff of yellow curls standing on end and the sudden blaze in her round blue eyes. "I'll see your disgusting Uncle Edmund dead in his coffin before I appear in that play."

This went on for some while. But not forever. Eventually she said:

“Well, darling, if it weren’t for you I’d never do it. You’ve got a sweeter nature than I have, Peter dear. What is it you want me to do?”

“Get down here as fast as you can. Uncle Edmund breakfasts at nine. I’m going to manage things so that by nine-thirty he’ll be prepared to sign the contract of sale. Then I want to reach you in a hurry and get you and your lawyer over here without a minute’s delay. If you stop for breakfast at—say—the Las Ondas Hotel, I can phone you when I need you.”

“All right, darling. I’ll do it.”

“And *keep your temper!*”

“I’ll try, Peter.” A pause. Then, “Peter dear!”

“Yes, darling?”

“I have a bit of good news for you, dear. Guess what? A job for you managing the Claire Bishop Film Company—if we get *Lady Pantagruel*.”

Owen exhaled deeply into the telephone. “How did you work that?”

“Oh, I’ve been at it quite a while. Your experience with the commercial film company got you a good name in certain circles, and I’ve been building you up tremendously. Yesterday afternoon I wrung a definite promise out of our most important backer, and all we need to do is sign up Uncle Edmund. Okay, Peter dear?”

“Ah,” Owen said, and there was a brief period of verbal smooching.

“You need not have been so prompt, Peter,” Uncle Edmund said with a smile of acid, looking up from his plate. “Sit down, sit down. Bad enough to eat oatmeal, without looking at a face like porridge while I do it.” He shuddered ostentatiously.

“Good morning, uncle. Good morning, Doctor Krafft. Was there any interesting mail?”

“Yes, there was,” Uncle Edmund said. “I got an offer from Metro for *Lady Pantagruel*, topping Miss Bishop’s by ten thousand. Naturally, I intend to—” Here he moved his hand suddenly, caught his cuff in the cream-jug and overturned its contents neatly into his lap.

His roar of rage made the windows rattle.

“Naturally, I intend to sell the play to Metro the moment Louis gets down to his desk!” he shouted, and leaped up, mopping furiously. “Peter, it’s your job to see that my belongings are set out where I don’t fall over them. I have a good notion to throw this in your face!”

Owen placidly slipped his hand in his pocket and turned back the clock. . . .

“—got an offer from Metro for *Lady Pantagruel*,” Uncle Edmund was saying serenely enough, spooning up oatmeal.

Owen leaned across the table and moved the cream-jug carefully. Uncle Edmund pierced him with an annoyed look, but before he could speak Dr. Krafft, following some private thought-train, spoke gently.

“You know,” he said, staring pensively at his thumb-nail, “I have almost remembered something! Wait. Please.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I think I know where I left my dear little Maxl!”

“On the beach!” Owen exploded, with such violence that Uncle Edmund jumped and nearly upset his oatmeal. Dr. Krafft opened his eyes, blinked, and shook his head.

“No, Peter, you have not guessed it. It was—wait, I almost have—”

“You took a walk on the beach yesterday morning,” Owen said. “You had some thinking to do. And you took Maxl along, remember?”

“Ah, but I brought him back again,” Dr. Krafft murmured. “No, I left Maxl on the—I left him—”

“On the beach,” Owen said firmly. “You didn’t bring him back. I remember noticing. I thought you must have put him in your pocket. But you couldn’t have. You were just wearing swimming trunks. That’s logical, isn’t it?”

“What?” the confused savant asked. “Pockets? No, I have no pockets in my swimming trunks. So Maxl could not be in them, of course. But I am almost—”

“Well, there you are,” Owen hurried on glibly. “You sat on the beach to think, and put Maxl where you could concentrate on him, and when you were through you just forgot Maxl. He’s probably still sitting on that rock—unless the tide washed him away,” he added cunningly.

“Ah, my poor little Maxl!” cried Dr. Krafft, struck to the heart. He pushed his chair back and cast a troubled glance about the table. “You must excuse me, Edmund, Peter. My poor Maxl, washed away! No, no! I come, Maxl!” And he trotted briskly out of the room.

Stumm grimly went on with his oatmeal, ignoring the confusion pointedly. Owen coughed.

“If you’re trying to attract my attention,” Stumm observed, “remember you’re a rational animal, not a dumb brute. Barking like an airedale is a poor substitute for civilized speech.”

Repressing an impulse to ask Uncle Edmund what he knew about civilized speech, Owen tactfully broached the subject of *Lady Pantagrue* again. Stumm said he’d had a better offer and didn’t care to discuss it.

“There was nothing but bills in the mail,” Owen remarked rather daringly.

“Hold your tongue,” Uncle Edmund commanded. “The basic postulate of non-allness—” Here he grew slightly confused by the magnitude of the subject he was approaching, changed his mind and drew an envelope from his inner pocket. “You saw *some* of the mail,” he said. “Not all of it. I opened this before you dragged yourself tardily down to breakfast. Metro. See?” He held up the envelope, but withdrew it quickly as Owen held out his hand. “Don’t snatch,” he said. “I haven’t the slightest thought of letting you gratify your Peeping-Tom proclivities.”

Owen thought fast. “That’s not Metro,” he said. “I can see it.”

His uncle turned the letter over, verified the printing on its face. “Astigmatic?” he inquired acidly. “Here—look.”

Owen lunged forward, snatched the envelope from his uncle’s hand and tore out the enclosed letter. C. Edmund Stumm, for once inarticulate, sat completely dazed and aghast as though the oatmeal had cursed him.

A glance at the letter was all Owen needed. He tossed it back across the table, grinning into Stumm’s empurpling face.

“Ten thousand more, eh?” he inquired of his gasping uncle. “Then why does Metro say that, in response to your inquiry, they can’t raise their last offer of six months ago, which must be considered final? Uncle Edmund, you’re a liar.”

Uncle Edmund said in a thick, choked voice, “Peter Owen, *do you know what’s going to happen?*”

“I know exactly what’s going to happen,” Owen said smugly. The blue clock was ready in his hand. He made a quick calculation, prepared to dodge the cream-jug if necessary, and moved time backward two minutes . . .

The bottom dropped out!

It was like his dream, only worse. He had a dizzy, disorienting feeling that he was swooping off in some hitherto unknown direction while dimensions rocked about him, though actually as he was well aware the room remained unchanged—except that Stumm was behaving very unpleasantly, putting an empty spoon into his mouth, removing it brimmed with oatmeal, depositing the cereal in his bowl and repeating the whole disgusting process.

And Dr. Krafft, conceivably gone mad with Maxl’s loss, ran backward into the room, collapsed in his chair, and presently began imitating his host’s nasty breakfast habits. Then both the Doctor and Stumm rose and ran backward out of the room, and—and—

The bottom dropped out faster! There was a wrenching jolt that shook Owen to his very eyeballs, and then he plunged back again in an opposite direction equally cryptic so far as orientation went. Stumm and Dr. Krafft raced into the room again, sprang into their chairs and began gobbling

breakfast like starving men. Then Dr. Krafft leaped to his feet—the man couldn't sit still a minute—and darted out of the room, while C. Edmund Stumm loped up, drew an envelope out of his pocket, and—

Jolt!

Pale with fright, Owen found himself in his chair again, staring at the clock he held as though it had turned into an infuriated cobra. But it made no hostile move. It had turned time back two minutes only. For Stumm was saying:

“—dragged yourself tardily down to breakfast. Metro. See?”

Owen looked at the envelope, smiled wanly, and peeped again at the clock in his lap. He felt a cold shudder go through him. An anchor? And being pulled up? What about his dream? What would happen next? Automatically he gripped the arms of the chair. Nothing happened. Perhaps the anchor could only be pulled up while it was moving in time. . . .

“Well?” Stumm inquired in a voice like vinegar. “Of course if Miss Bishop could top Metro's offer—”

Owen pulled himself together long enough to say firmly, “She won't. She can't. It's the highest price she can offer, and if you won't take it she'll have to find some other property, that's all. But she can't pay out money that isn't on her company's budget.”

Stumm seemed taken aback. He turned the envelope over in his hands, like a man who has failed to fill a straight, and at last put it pensively in his pocket. He took up his oatmeal spoon. Owen winced at the sight of it.

“Well,” Stumm murmured. “Well—*Hmm.*”

“She could give you cash on the barrel,” Owen said. “A certified check for the full amount. But she can't top her last offer, and that's all there is to it.”

“Certified check, eh?” the unscrupulous playwright muttered. “So. Well, perhaps I might consider it, after all. At least, it'll be all in the family, in a manner of speaking. I have a certain obligation to my own flesh and blood.”

Owen jumped up. “I'll phone her,” he said, and dashed toward the door. Before he could reach it the door burst open and Dr. Krafft rushed breathless into the room.

“Burglary!” Dr. Krafft cried. “I saw it through the library window! Edmund, burglars have robbed you and stolen my dear Max!”

We have been here before.

We have seen it all. We have not, perhaps, observed Peter Owen fumbling anxiously with the clock in his jacket pocket, waiting for an explosion that would force him to erase the scene yet again. But otherwise,

all goes now as it went then, in serial-time tracks through paratime under the no doubt interested gaze of Wynken, Blinken and Nod.

Owen paid small attention to Krafft and Stumm. He was focusing inward with some agony of spirit upon what had just happened to him at the breakfast table. It was all very well to stand outside time, as it were, participating in these scenes like an actor on a stage, able to stop the play, and step into the wings whenever he chose. But if time was going to behave like a flickering film instead of a solid stage performance, Peter Owen was not the man to meddle with it.

What *had* happened, anyhow? His giddiness was still too fresh to let him think clearly. That swan dive into the unplumbed temporal ocean gave him a chilled feeling around the innards. And yet, his wild speculation about the anchor being hauled up was simply a baseless theoretical supposition—he hoped. Very likely he could turn time back again with no repercussions at all. But might it not be wise to turn it only a few seconds at most, perhaps? And not oftener than he had to?

He didn't have to, now. All he really had to do was get Claire here and the contract signed before Chief Egan arrived to touch off the inevitable explosions that seemed to follow him about in Stumm's presence as lightning followed the cypress. Owen felt sorry for the man, but he couldn't help him. He couldn't undo the burglary, and Egan was beyond aid.

Uncle Edmund's voice slowly penetrated his thoughts. Uncle Edmund was at the hall telephone, invisible to the eye but extremely audible, making fiery remarks into the mouthpiece. As Owen's attention returned, Stumm said crisply:

"See to it, then. No dawdling, either!" He was heard to jiggle the mechanism impatiently.

"Hello, hello, operator? Get me the Mayor. What? Then look it up. I'm no city directory. Get me the Mayor, hear me? Life or death."

"Want me to handle it?" Owen asked hopefully, crossing to the door in a well-meaning attempt to divert the course of justice.

"Pah," Stumm snorted. "I shall be delighted to handle it myself. Hello? James? This is C. Edmund Stumm. I've just summoned the police to my house. Yes. *Yes!* And I demand that you fire that incompetent bamboozlehead you call a Chief of Police!"

He went on from there, almost word for word, while Owen wriggled uncomfortably. When Stumm hung up at last, with a look of malevolent smugness, Owen said,

"Ah—shall I call Miss Bishop now?"

"Why not?" Stumm asked, somewhat to his nephew's surprise. He then linked his arm companionably in Dr. Krafft's and said above the gentle

babble about Maxl, “Come, Doctor, come! We have a breakfast to finish.”

Owen sighed deeply and called the Las Ondas Hotel.

“And you mean he’s really going to part with *Lady Pantagruel* at last?” Claire demanded in a squeaky voice out of the instrument. She sounded much more wakeful now and in a mood of excitement. “Peter darling, you’re a marvel!”

“You’re another,” Peter told her fondly. With glazed disinterest he watched his uncle emerge from the breakfast room carrying a cup of coffee and vanish into the pillaged library, closing the door behind him. “You’ll have to hurry, darling,” he told the small voice in the telephone. “You’ve got your lawyer with you?”

“Everything’s lovely. We’re on our way. Five minutes should do it, dear. I adore you.” The telephone made loving noises at Owen as he laid it down. He stood there in a roseate dream, gazing at it, until a sound from the far end of the hall roused him rudely. It was the doorbell, making most unloving noises.

Owen groaned and started toward it. Egan, beyond a doubt.

Dr. Krafft’s anxious form jumped for the door before Owen had taken his second step. The aged savant in his bereaved state had evidently been lying in wait. The police chief’s great, pink visage loomed up tremendously over Krafft’s white head.

“This way, this way,” Krafft said, bustling forward.

Owen cried, “Wait!” in vain.

Egan was already trying the library door. He set his huge shoulder against it as Owen called, and the crackle of moisture-swollen wood drowned out his cry. The door flew open, there was a thud, and a howl of berserker fury.

CHAPTER VII

Anchor Is A-Druggin'!

Despite his dread, Owen had to use the clock again!

Very quickly, taking as few chances as he dared, he turned the long-hand back a scant two minutes. The hall emptied as by magic. The howl of anger died upon the air. Owen dropped the clock back in his pocket, too intent even to rejoice more than perfunctorily that on this occasion no lurching through time had seized him. His whole interest was in getting to the door before Krafft could open it.

The bell rang loudly.

“Come in, come in,” Owen said, jerking the door open. “Yes, yes, hello, Egan. Stand where you are! Don’t move a muscle. Now wait.”

“But Peter!” Dr. Krafft said anxiously, bustling toward him. “Your uncle is waiting for the gentleman.”

“I know, doctor. But wait. Please let me handle this.”

Dr. Krafft shrugged and subsided, turning to follow Owen’s fixed stare. The three of them stood for about forty seconds, pinning the closed library door with expectant eyes. Then footsteps sounded from inside it, the knob rattled, the door groaned rebelliously on its swollen jamb, and C. Edmund Stumm staggered through as it flew open at last. He cast an angry glance at his audience down the hall and strode away, clutching his notebook.

“Now the coast is clear,” Owen said with relief. “Come on. But be careful, Egan. Please be careful! Look out for that lamp.”

Peering down at his guide curiously, the police chief followed him down the hall. Owen’s nervousness increased to the point where Egan had begun to give him long, pensive looks by the time they reached the ravaged cabinet which was their goal.

“Tell me what happened, Pete,” Egan suggested, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he gazed upon the wreckage. Owen was about to answer, though he was getting pretty tired of this recital, when a thin, high, intermittent squeal from the hall penetrated his awareness.

“Oh, gosh!” he said abruptly. “Excuse me!” And he dashed out of the room.

The squeal came from the telephone, which now hung by its cord in midair. Owen snatched it up, gabbling, “Hello? Hello?”

“Peter!” It was Claire’s voice, sounding angry. “Are you all right?”

“Sure. What happened?”

“That’s what I want to know! You get me out of bed in the dawn and drag me down here to Las Ondas and then when you finally condescend to phone me, you just say, ‘It’s Peter,’ and walk calmly away. I won’t stand for rudeness, Peter! I—oh, I’m going to hang up before I say something I shouldn’t!” And she did.

“*Oh!*” Owen cried in heartfelt tones, as he realized what had happened. By turning back the clock to prevent Egan from assaulting Uncle Edmund, he had automatically erased nearly all his conversation with Claire. So naturally he hadn’t told her to hurry on out to the house.

Dithering gently, Owen called the Las Ondas Hotel again. While measured ringing still sounded over the wire, the voice of C. Edmund Stumm began to shout furiously somewhere behind him. The name of Egan figured prominently in the tirade.

“I’ll kill myself!” Owen threatened wildly. He snatched for his pocket, too harried even to think now of possible menace inherent in the clock which was also an anchor. Estimating rapidly, he set back the minutes.

The house was quiet. The phone was on its cradle in the wall-niche. Taking a deep breath, he picked it up and gave the number of the hotel. When Claire came to the telephone at last, Owen was ready for her.

“Claire!” he said frantically. “I love you madly! Don’t hang up again! Wait for me, please! I may have to do something vitally important, before I finish talking. But please wait!”

“Is that you, Peter?” Claire asked. “Of course I’ll wait. What is it, darling?”

He told her again how fast he wanted her to come to the Stumm house. He said a quick good-by and sprinted furiously toward the front door, reaching it just as the bell sounded yet again.

This time his nonchalance was such that Egan got the impression that burglaries were so commonplace the only natural response was that of utter boredom. He got Egan safely into the library. He got Uncle Edmund out and comfortably settled under an umbrella on the patio with his notes. He was trying not to think of all those little knots of quarreling Egan and Stumms whom he had left jettisoned in time behind him, and when the doorbell rang again—he was with Egan in the library at the moment—Owen could only stand there looking in bewilderment at the police chief, who was wiping fingerprint powder off the cabinet frame. He was trying to figure out how Egan could be in the library and at the front door at the same time, and what would happen when the two Egan met.

It took considerable effort to pull himself together, remember that just now he was not backspacing in time, and that other people than Egan might

conceivably ring the doorbell. Then he went out and admitted Claire and her attorney.

Since you *must* have seen Claire Bishop's latest film, there is little point in describing her here. Then as now she had the same angelic fluff of yellow curls and the same jaunty swing to her walk. The lawyer looked like a man who had bridged the gap between humanity and the judicial servo-mechanism. He was perfectly bloodless and colorless, and for a mouth he had merely a slot through which judgments emerged at intervals from the differential analyzer inside his head. By comparison, Claire was so warmly human that Owen could scarcely bear it.

With his heart in his mouth and one hand in his pocket on the clock, Owen shuffled the characters in his personal drama into position. Egan and his aides were evicted to look for footprints on the terrace. Uncle Edmund was all but carried in on a pillow and settled with elaborate solicitude at his library desk. Claire and the lawyer were marshaled into place. Looking from Claire to her legal robot to Uncle Edmund, Owen could not help feeling she was between the devil and the deep. The attorney certainly seemed deep. His photoelectric eyes scanned the room, his mind rapidly charted a curve on a graph, and he waited in ticking silence.

Perhaps the horrid efficiency of the man cowed Uncle Edmund. Somehow the contract was unfolded on the desk in an incredibly short time. Stumm's natural procrastination failed before the lawyer's geared promptness. Owen had an odd impression that the lawyer had actually printed the contract before his very eyes, through some strange photo-engraving process, though this of course was not the case. Owen exchanged calf-like stares with Claire, the triumph of man over machine.

"Well—" Uncle Edmund said, trapped into honesty. "I suppose—ah—" He picked up his pen and fiddled with an imaginary thread in its point. He shot a glance at Claire. "Naturally I had a much taller woman in mind for Lady Pantagrue," he said offensively.

Claire drew a deep breath. Owen's hand clamped painfully on hers and she let the breath out again wordlessly.

"Of course I've had a better offer," Uncle Edmund said, a liar to the last.

The attorney glanced at his watch, accurate to the microsecond. Uncle Edmund gave it a nervous look and put the point of his pen to the dotted line. He traced a large, ostentatious C—

The telephone at his elbow rang loudly.

Owen hurled himself forward. "I'll take it, I'll take it!" he gabbled. "Pay no attention, Uncle Edmund. Go right ahead and sign. Yes, yes, hello?"

The attorney regarded the phone with some mild interest, as though he too, in his younger days, had been a telephone switchboard.

There was some confusion at the other end of the wire. A plaintive voice kept saying that Los Angeles was calling. But a deeper voice drowned it out, demanding to speak to Chief Egan.

“It’s for Egan,” Owen told his waiting uncle, who was gazing coldly at him, eyebrows raised, pen divorced from the lines it had just been tracing. Owen stepped to the broken French door, trying to still the wild beating of his heart, and shouted for the police chief. A voice replied from the edge of the terrace and Egan came lumbering toward the door. Just in time Owen diverted him to another entrance. “You can take it on the hall extension,” he said rapidly. “A phone call, I mean. For you. That way, over there.”

Stumm had pressed his hand to his forehead. Owen gazed at him with thumping heart.

“Well?” Claire said in a voice that for acid matched Stumm’s best efforts. But she fell silent at an admonitory glance from the attorney.

“My nerves,” Stumm said faintly, and made the mistake of meeting the lawyer’s cold, judicial eye. A coward, like all bullies, he took up the pen again. He gazed from face to face around the room, apparently trying to find some excuse for what could prove a profitable delay. But Claire had been well schooled. She might never have heard of Shostakovich. Owen held his breath as Uncle Edmund traced the initial E of his middle name. The sound of pen on paper scratched loud in the silence.

“You dirty, double-crossing yellow rat!”

Incredibly, it was Chief Egan’s voice that thundered horribly through the room. Uncle Edmund’s pen clattered to the desk from nerveless fingers. Chairs scraped and creaked as all present jerked around incredulously to stare at the open doorway, blocked now by the vast blue bulk of the Chief. That there might be no doubt whom he was addressing, Egan shot out a mighty arm, pointed straight at Uncle Edmund, and going even more crimson in the face than before, bellowed:

“You sneaking, chiseling little skunk! Get me fired, will you? That’s a low-down, dirty trick!”

Owen moaned pitifully and leaped to his feet.

“Oh, no, no, not now!” he cried, springing forward distractedly. “Egan, wait!”

But Egan was beyond appeal. Brushing Owen aside, he strode forward toward the desk, pushing back his cuff with horrible intent to free the great pink mallet of his fist.

“I’ve been wanting to do this for months and months,” he declared, advancing upon the appalled and speechless Stumm. “I couldn’t do it in

uniform. But I'm a civilian now! This is going to be worth whatever it costs me!"

Kicking chairs out of his path, he advanced like Juggernaut itself, rounded the corner of the desk and with a resounding crack of fist on flesh knocked C. Edward Stumm over backward.

There was involuntary rash applause from Claire. The attorney didn't stir. He seemed to be analyzing the whole affair with admirable detachment. Owen clawed out the blue enamel clock, striving in vain to steady his shaking fingers. Time turned backward. . . .

This time it was worse than before.

That terrible disorientation gripped Owen in a gigantic pendulum-swing as the bottom dropped out of creation. Frantically he threw himself at a chair and wound his arms around it, trying to anchor himself like a limpet. But the chair melted into mist as he plummeted through time. He had one fading glimpse of Uncle Edmund, grimacing like a demon, ripping the contract in halves in lieu of Egan.

Then the pendulum swung wide, daylight gave place to dark, and Owen heard thunder roll and saw the library stroboscopically illumined by lightning. He was swinging farther than before, back into last night. And then forward. . . .

Snap!

He was groveling on the floor before the desk, as though in pleading abnegation before a throne. Claire and the lawyer were peering down at him. From behind the desk sounded the scratch of pen on paper, instantly suspended as Stumm said crossly, "What in the world—Peter?"

The telephone rang.

Owen sprang up as from a catapult, snatched the telephone from beneath his uncle's descending hand. Stumm jerked back in terror. "Don't *do* that!" he complained. But Owen scarcely heard him. He was listening again to the brief argument between long distance and the Mayor. Again the Mayor triumphed.

"He just left," Owen babbled in response to the inquiry about Egan. "Too late to catch him now. Try Headquarters. He won't be back here. Never. No use trying."

He then hung up convulsively, noticed that he still held the clock in his hand, and dropped it into his pocket with a feeble smile around the circle of faces turned to him in astonishment. Claire seemed distressed, the lawyer was running a brief sanity test based on observable data, and Stumm had a stuffed look of affront.

“Wrong number,” Owen said feebly. Stumm favored him with a long, steady glare.

Then he picked up the pen and signed the contract. . . .

Owen let out a tremendous sigh of relief. Stumm glared at him, threw down the pen and shoved the contract across the desk. The attorney rose stiffly.

“Witnesses, please,” he said.

“To a contract of sale?” Stumm asked. “Is that usual?”

“Advisable in this case,” the attorney said in a voice that brooked no argument.

“All right, I’ll witness it,” Owen said. “Where do I sign?”

“No, not you,” the attorney said, giving him a slow, measuring look. “Blood relation. Need disinterested witnesses.” What he really meant, as Owen knew very well, was that a witness had to be of sound mind. He was too crushed to resent the implication.

At this fortuitous moment Dr. Krafft was seen trotting briskly across the terrace outside.

“Chief Egan!” he was heard to call in his mild though agitated tones. “Chief Egan, is there any trace of my little Max?”

“Dr. Krafft!” Owen bellowed. Then, shocked at the volume of his own voice, he stepped to the door and spoke more mildly. “Dr. Krafft, would you step in here a moment? We need a witness to Uncle Edmund’s signature.”

“Two witnesses,” the lawyer said decisively.

“Ah yes, of course,” Dr. Krafft said, beaming. “Delighted, delighted. My dear Chief, perhaps you will do for the other party? Come!”

Gulping, Owen stood back to let them in. After all, the contract had been signed. The worst was surely over. But he kept his hand on the clock, praying fervently that he need never risk using it again, as he watched Dr. Krafft affix his (highly negotiable) autograph to the page.

Egan, true to form, made a little awkwardness about signing. He wanted to be sure what he was putting his name to. Blushing but adamant, he took the contract to the window to examine it. Owen kept his hand firm on the clock, his eye on Egan and his ears intent for the fatal ringing of the phone.

Egan, ponderously satisfied, put the contract flat on the window-pane and scrawled his name laboriously on the page. He had not quite finished when again the telephone burst into furious ringing.

“Allow me!” Uncle Edmund snapped angrily, forestalling Owen’s dive with a deft motion. “Hello, hello? Yes, naturally this is C. Edmund Stumm. Whom did you expect? I—oh, *Metro!*” His voice turned to syrup.

The room was gripped in a trance of silence. In it the tiny buzzing voice from the receiver spoke as clearly as a hornet might, given human speech.

"I am instructed to tell you, Mr. Stumm," the hornet said, "that we have reconsidered our position on *Lady Pantagruel*. Our office has just signed Jessica Tandy, and we want your play as her first starring vehicle. We're prepared to pay the additional ten thousand, if the play is still available."

"Of *course* it's available!" Uncle Edmund cried heartily. "I—ah—I'll call you back in five minutes. Thank *you*. Goodbye!"

He hung up with a sort of sliding obliqueness, because he was already out of his chair and diving for Egan and the contract.

"Give me that document!" he snapped. "Egan, you hear me? Hand it over quick, before I have you fired!"

"Egan—*no!*" Owen cried wildly, jumping forward. "Don't you do it! He signed it! It's Claire's!"

"Prove it!" Uncle Edmund shouted. "I'll fight you in every court in the land! You and your thieving friends knew Metro would meet my price! No wonder you were in such a hurry to bilk me!"

"Why, you—you conceited old toad!" Claire gasped in a fury.

"Claire!" Owen begged, swirling in circles. "Egan, please! Uncle Edmund!"

"Egan!" Uncle Edmund said in a commanding voice. "Remember who I am. Hand over my property or I'll have you out of your job before sundown!"

"Oh, what a liar!" Owen babbled. "Egan, he's got you fired already. Go on, get mad at him! The Mayor just made you resign—don't you remember? I know it never happened—I mean, it *did* happen, but you don't know it! Egan!"

But Egan, gazing at Owen with alarm, as well he might, was already handing the contract into Stumm's outstretched grasp. . . .

Owen groaned, took out the clock, and with a sinking heart turned the hands back five minutes, knowing dimly that this time he was probably going too far.

He was perfectly right.

CHAPTER VIII

Guided Missile

Horribly, the bottom dropped, with a jolt, out of all creation!

There was a terrific wrench that seemed to tear Owen free from his very eyeteeth, and clutching the clock in a grip of death he went spinning dizzily into unknowable dimensions. The anchor was being hoisted in nasty, jerking tugs while Owen at the very end of its chain swung like a pendulum through time.

Now the storm of last night thundered again. Temporally diffused lightning gave the library a dim gray radiance. Through the window Owen saw the cypress spring back triumphant from its watery grave and vigorously re-root itself. Again that yanking tug. He was ascending, in some direction he couldn't understand, and the pendulum of time swung wider.

It swung tremendously, far behind the limits the clock had imposed. He had a lunatic glimpse of a cheerful, drooling infant whom he identified with himself in earlier years. He saw a bearded old gentleman he dimly remembered as his grandfather, and noticed Indians morosely building a mission on the terrace under a much younger and more lissom cypress. The pendulum paused at the end of its swing. For a flashing instant everything was solid and real again. But before he could get his footing the lurch forward began and he swept helplessly with it, faster, this trip, right up to the moment when Claire, the lawyer, Egan, Dr. Krafft, Stumm and himself stood together around the desk.

And still forward!

Faces and events flashed past in a stew of incoherence. He thought he saw himself with a gray beard and Claire sweetly dithering into senility while their great-grandchildren clustered lovingly around them. Again there was a pause and a tug, and the faces vanished.

Owen felt perfectly convinced that he was being pulled up with the anchor to explode like a deep-sea fish when he reached the surface of normal-time, scattering himself through many centuries. He wanted desperately to let go of the clock, but he didn't dare. Momentum might carry him off, lubricated as he was with that damned temporal draught, so that he'd go slipping down the greased runways to—to *when?*

"No, no," he gibbered to himself. "How will I look splashed all through a millennium? It wasn't worth it. Nothing's worth this!" There was a jolt and all motion stopped.

Then he was swinging again. Time had become a constant and space fluid, and he swept spinning backward past the signing of the contract, past the immolation of the cypress, into the beginnings of the storm.

It was a shorter swing this time. As the anchor rose the arcs seemed to grow briefer. He paused in the red light of yesterday's sunset and began again to sweep through the interminable recurrence of last night.

Owen shut his eyes, unable to face the prospect of watching the cypress struck down again by its relentless destiny. He opened them just in time to see something that made him catch his breath. Something, in fact, that would put victory in his grasp if he could ever come to a halt long enough to use it.

He was sweeping through the early hours of last night. Moving in rapid sequence, telescoped in time, he saw Uncle Edmund's diabolic face outside the closed French door of the library. He saw the brick clenched in Stumm's fist as he cocked an eye toward the sky. Thunder crashed, and with it crashed the brick, straight through the glass door.

Dazed, Owen saw his unregenerate uncle dart into the room, hurl the brick at the wall-cabinet, and with both gloved hands flashing furiously, begin to scoop out the valuable and hideous gold coins. Moving like lightning, the self-made criminal dashed across the room to the safe, whirled it open and decanted the coins into it more rapidly than light itself. At the last moment he was seen to glance around the room, meet the eye of a small green toad squatting on the desk, and with a darting motion hurl Maxl in after the coins, slamming the safe door behind him.

So now it was all clear—too late. C. Edmund Stumm himself was the burglar who had looted the library. With his customary lack of ethics, Stumm had killed a number of birds with one well-aimed stone. Bills had been mounting up. The coins were insured, of course. And Uncle Edmund had presumably believed last night that Claire wouldn't buy *Lady Pantagrue* under any circumstances, after their difference of opinion on Shostakovich.

So he had committed the robbery, which would not only enrich him without cost but would wreak vengeance on Chief Egan and remove Maxl so that Dr. Krafft would waste no more time on experiments that might be better spent helping Stumm with his new play.

Shocked but not surprised, Owen shook his head. Then he realized that he had very little concern in mundane matters, after all. The anchor was still rising in sickening jerks. Very soon now Owen would pop out into paratime clinging like a barnacle to the anchor, only to explode all over creation.

Skimming through time, he caught a brief, telescoping glimpse of himself and Dr. Krafft conferring over an endlessly multiplied glass of beer, and the gentle old savant's words came back to him echoing—action and reaction, universal physical laws, an instaneous object—and the result of running into another time-traveler. What if he did? The momentum might at least break up this endless swinging.

Another time-traveler was the only conceivable body in paratime that *could* collide with his.

“Wait!” Owen commanded himself suddenly, and quite uselessly, of course. “Another time-traveler?” Of course there was one. The clock! He and the clock together, lubricated to frictionless smoothness, hurtling from end to end of time.

If he threw the clock away, what would happen? Some dim recollection of recoil principles stirred in his mind. A man in free space might move himself by throwing an object away from him into the void.

He drew back his arm for the toss—and held it motionless as a new thought flashed through his mind. He was, after all, C. Edmund Stumm's own nephew. And he could kill two birds with one stone quite as well as his uncle had done. He saw it all in one beautiful, blinding glimpse.

If Dr. Krafft's ideas were not all nonsense, it ought to work. Dr. Krafft's beloved tesseract, which he had tried to push into three-dimensional cubes by throwing energy at them through time. It had never actually worked, in practise. It never had worked in a three-dimensional world. But that didn't mean it couldn't, if the basic idea were sound. If an object actually moving through time—like a clock—were to impinge hard on a solid cube—like a safe—strange things would result.

With furious patience, Owen waited for the moment of stasis that came at the end of each swing. They were growing quite short now. He paused for an instant in the fluid center of the breakfast room, watching Stumm and Dr. Krafft greedily beginning their thousandth several breakfast with undiminished appetite, though Owen was by now sick at the very sight of oatmeal. He saw them whirl away as he swept forward through time, slowed, drew nearer and nearer a library scene in which a twitching tableau stood, Stumm holding out his demanding hand toward the hesitating Egan with the contract.

Time paused. Owen collected all his strength, and just as he felt the beginning of the backward tug, hurled the clock with all his power past Stumm's head at the safe in the wall.

The result was startling, though supremely logical.

A rubber ball hurled hard against a floating box will move the box very slightly, while the ball itself, with less mass, will rebound. But the box *will* move. Physical law requires it to move—in space.

The clock was moving in time as well as in space. Its physical mass was naturally not enough to budge the safe a hairsbreadth, in space. But time is measured otherwise. A few micrometers in space might not be noticeable to the casual glance, but a few seconds or minutes in time are a different matter entirely.

The impact of the clock, in short, knocked the safe into a tesseract.

Rebounding violently, the clock then shot off into infinity at an angle the eye could not follow, and was seen no more by mortal eyes. But the safe seemed to jolt, to stir, and then to unpleat like an accordion. What it looked like is impossible to say, since no words exist to describe the motion of a tesseract through its native dimension. But the result of that motion is quite easy to name. Transparency.

Jolt! Snap!

“Most unethical,” the lawyer was murmuring, as Egan held out the papers.

“Egan!” shrieked Owen, collapsing heavily on the floor, not even aware that he was real again. “Egan, wait! Look!” And his outflung finger pointed at the safe.

“For the love of Pete!” Egan said dazedly, stepping back and dropping his hand. “Stumm, look! *What is it?*”

Stumm’s clawing grasp just missed the contract, and the tone of Egan’s voice made him whirl, expecting some sudden horror at his back.

All eyes were now turned toward the safe, and for an instant utter silence reigned.

Then, with a heartstirring cry of “*Maxl!*” Dr. Krafft bounded forward. His outstretched hands went through the temporally exploded safe as though its steel walls were air. It is a sad and ironic fact that not until much later did he realize at all what he had done. The culmination of a lifetime’s experimenting took place successfully for the first and last time before his eyes, but all he saw just then was the broad green grin of Maxl, and reunion with his dear frog was the only thing that mattered.

Far otherwise it was for Police Chief Egan. For Maxl squatted on a perfectly visible heap of gold coins, compressed into a tight mass by the invisible walls of the safe.

“That’s the coin collection,” Egan said dazedly. “But I thought it was supposed to have been stolen!” Slowly he turned toward C. Edmund Stumm.

Slowly his face hardened. "Oh," he said. "I—I think I get it. Yeah, I think I get it!"

"Nonsense!" Stumm blustered. "Ridiculous! I have no idea how—how —" The playwright's face was a picture of guilty confusion as his words faded faintly away.

"But what's *happening*?" Claire demanded, her voice rising to a squeak of confusion. "The safe! Look at it! It makes me dizzy. I—I think I'm going to—to faint or something."

Gladly Owen flung his arms about her. "It's nothing, darling," he said. "Don't look at it. Naturally it makes you dizzy, but never mind. It's contracting again. In a minute or two it'll be right back in shape. I wonder why? Temporal metallic memory? Or is it just catching up with itself in time?"

No one paid any attention to these mad words. All eyes were fixed glazedly on the slowly solidifying cube of the safe.

All eyes, that is, but the photoelectric lenses of the attorney. Clearing his throat significantly, he stepped forward.

"Chief Egan," he said, "may I trouble you for our contract?"

"The contract!" Stumm screamed, recalled to life by the magic word. "It's mine! Egan, I demand it!"

Egan turned his massive head slowly. "What contract?" he asked. Then he turned his back deliberately toward Owen and put his hand behind him. The contract flipped significantly, like an albino robin's tail.

Owen's hand closed on the paper. Egan let go. The large hand curled so that finger and thumb made a definitive O of satisfaction. The attorney, who had apparently not noticed this byplay, thrust a certified check into Stumm's limp hand.

"Oh, the contract," Owen said above the fluff of fragrant yellow curls pressed to his cheek. "Why, I have it, Uncle Edmund. All signed, sealed and witnessed. Claire and I will be going now. By the way, I quit. I'm sure you and Chief Egan will have a lot—an awful lot—to say to each other!"

The rest was silence, except for the violent cursing of C. Edmund Stumm.

The reader will be pleased to learn that Stumm was prosecuted to the full extent of the law and departed from Las Ondas forever, in the shadow of deep disgrace.

As for Fred Egan, he was confirmed as Chief of Police and occupies the office to this day, to the great good fortune of old ladies, small children and drunks whom he sees carefully home at night, to the satisfaction of all.

Dr. Krafft and his dear Maxl went home to Connecticut and immersed themselves once more in experiments with tesseracts, though of course they never proved anything.

And penultimately, *Lady Pantagruel* in film was a great box office success, though naturally not an artistic one. It launched the happily married Claire and Owen on a long and promising career as manager-actress team. They have two beautiful children already, and hope for more.

Finally, as for Wynken, Blinken and Nod, they secured a more fool-proof anchor and went on voyaging through paratime into the glamorous past. And they live happily ever before.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *As You Were* by Henry Kuttner]