



The Time Tragedy

by Raymond A. Palmer

“**Y**up, the judge is taking it pretty hard. Y’see, the boy’s his only son, and him being missin’ this way for more’n a month without no word; well, if you knew as well as I do the way them two has been pals, you’d kinda get the way the judge is taking it.” Police Lieutenant McKennedy shifted his plug of tobacco to the other jaw and observed the big feet of the sergeant on the desk before him.

“Funny where he went,” came a voice from behind the feet, “just seemed to drop clean out of sight.”

“You said it. I ain’t never seen anything dang it, there goes the phone again.” McKennedy reached over and yanked the instrument to his chest. “Police headquarters,” he barked. “Oh, hello, judge, no word yet what!”

The sergeant’s feet thumped to the floor at the incredulous enunciation of the last word. McKennedy clapped his hand over the mouthpiece. “My God, sarge, the judge is going nuts says he’s going to commit suicide. Get out the squad and hurry down to his place while I try to stall him.”

McKennedy removed his hand from the mouthpiece as the sergeant turned on his heel. “Wait a minute, judge; say that again.”

The voice from the receiver sounded clearly in the silence of the office. “I said I’m going to kill myself. I’m going to go insane otherwise.”

“Good Lord, judge, don’t do that. We’ll find the boy soon now”

“No you won’t. He’s dead.”

“Who told you that? We’ve no report indicating anything”

“I tell you he’s dead! And I killed him! Now listen, McKennedy; my mind is going and I’ve got to tell you before I die. I killed him, I tell you, over thirty years ago!”

McKennedy’s face paled at the terror shrilling into his ear through the receiver, but

his attempt at interruption was vain. There was no stopping the voice. It rang on.

“Don’t try to stop me. I’ve got to tell the story from the beginning. You’ve got to believe it. This afternoon the photographer delivered the prints of a snapshot I took just before William disappeared. Then the newspapers called asking for some information about the missing boy, and I got out an old scrapbook of family clippings. A similarity between the photo I had just received and an old newsprint picture drew my attention but I must begin at the beginning or you won’t understand.” And this is the judge’s story:

* * *

In the spring of 1901, two years after I took the bench, my father, Andrew Gregory, was murdered. I remember the night horribly well. Father had gone into the library to secure a book on law to substantiate a point in argument, while I remained seated before the comfortable fire in the living room—you know the situation; the house is the same now as it was then. Suddenly I heard a peculiar whining noise, the noise that a swiftly running dynamo might make, then a crash. Father cried out and I dashed toward the library to investigate, but I was too late. On the floor, blood oozing from a deep wound in his head, was Father, and standing over him in an attitude of stupefaction was a young man, perhaps twenty-five years old. A heavy andiron from the library fireplace was in his hand.

For a moment we faced each other, the young fellow staring at me with what seemed, at the time, an unnaturally horrified air. I tell you, that young man was more terrified at the sight of me than he was of the deed he had just committed.

“You!” he gasped. Then pale as a

ghost, but with an astounding alacrity, he leaped from a window and was gone.

Our police department was as efficient as it is now, and before the night was over, he was in a cell.

I went down to see him the next day.

When I appeared at the entrance to his cell, he leaped to his feet, presenting an extremely disheveled countenance to my view—a face that had gone through hell.

“God, no!” he cried, thrusting an arm before his eyes protectingly. “It can’t be true!”

“But it is, you scoundrel!” I retorted. “Young man, do you realize that you are a murderer?”

He did not answer, continuing to cower back in that strange terror of me. “What is your name?” I tried another question.

He turned downright ashen then, dropping his arm from his eyes to stare into mine. “William Gregory,” he choked out, as if the words were the hardest he had ever spoken. I was taken aback. It was something of a shock to learn that his last name was the same as mine, and thus, of course, also that of his victim. I remember how the newspapers played that up.

I pursued my questioning. “What was your errand in my house last night? You don’t look like a thief.”

He ignored my question, continuing to stare at me. I grew uncomfortable under the horror possessing the depths of those black eyes. Then suddenly he burst out, “Tell me,” he begged, “tell me, what year is this? They told me it was....” he halted, as if dreading to mention it.

“What year?” I asked in an astounded tone. “Why it’s 1901, of course. Are you trying to feign insanity? If you are, you aren’t going to get away with it.”

At once he dropped to his cot, a blank look of despair settling upon his face, and he

addressed no one in particular. “William Gregory—1901—sentenced to... no!” His shout was sudden and determined. “No, I’m not insane. My mind is as clear as yours—a whole lot clearer. As to what I was doing in your house last night, I cannot tell you. You would not believe, nor would it change the course of events were I to tell you. What has been, must be.”

From that moment on, McKennedy, I marveled with everyone else at the silence the youth steadfastly maintained. All through the trial we could get nothing from him but an admission of his guilt and the meaningless statement that what had been, must be. The jury found him guilty in what was claimed record time. They were influenced by what the papers decried as “incredible stubbornness and an apparent indifference to his crime.”

On May 29, 1901. I sentenced him to hang by the neck until he should be dead—on July 8 the sentence was carried out. I have the clippings before me bearing those fatal dates. Until this day I have had no reason to examine them closely in an effort to refresh my memory, but now they burn in my brain in letters of fire. But to continue my story in proper sequence, William Gregory, the murderer, became but a dim, hardly remembered memory that finally faded out entirely. In 1908 I married, and in 1909 my son was born. A momentary recollection of the case flashed into my mind at the news that my wife had selected William as the name for my son, but I dismissed it as unworthy of mention, since she seemed so thoroughly to like the name.

During the years that passed, would to God that I had scanned my scrapbooks, but being modestly inclined, I disliked such egotistical indulgence. If I had, I might have noted the growing resemblance and when the time came, done the one thing that might have changed the future. But I did not, and the

scrapbooks gathered dust in the garret.

William progressed finely in school, evidencing a promising engineering ability along with a keen scientific mind. He discussed with friends things far beyond my own mental interests, and finally I abandoned the fond hope that he would become a practical engineer when I perceived that his mind strayed more into theoretical channels. I was quite satisfied that he should be an inventor, and since my own fortune had accumulated to a satisfying degree. I allowed him to develop his life work in his own way, acting merely as the source of supply for materials upon which to vent his genius.

You know his success as well as I do. He did fine work in the development of radio. Television reached a degree of perfection through one of his theories, although he himself did not achieve the final result due to what I sometimes considered his foolishness in immediately publishing his theories, allowing other inventors to keep stride and even to forge ahead of him in actual development. But then, it was his keen insight into the future that told him of the deadlock that would result because of the extreme costliness of practical use.

Thus, early in 1933 he turned to a new theory. He studied Einstein's concepts until he understood them as perfectly, I believe, as even the great mathematician himself. Finally his interest devolved down to one important item. Time, its meaning, and the answer to its riddle, became his one interest.

For long months he worked on his new apparatus, telling no one exactly what he was searching for, nor his purpose, until about five weeks ago. He came to me then with a light of exultance shining in his eyes and his lips brimming with scientific explanations. Time-traveling, he explained, had been his object, and impossible as it seemed to me, he insisted that it was a fact—he had accomplished his

objective!

As I gazed at the complicated array of machinery that confronted me in his laboratory above the library, I was suddenly possessed with the certainty that he had done something unknowable. The machinery had a veritable aura of untried possibilities emanating from its shining parts. I felt it, too, in his enthusiasm as he explained it all to me. An uncanny feeling of foreboding crept over me. but I shook it off. Complicated as this machine looked, I was sure that it could not offer anything of harm. There were no moving parts; electrical connections were all properly grounded and safety measures provided for any overload of current, which was unlikely, as the apparatus functioned on ordinary house current.

“Have you tried it out?” I asked him when he had finished his description of it. “No,” he replied. “I am going to make several tests that will take me a few more days and then I am going to make a personal sally into time.” Before I left, he made one of the tests, which consisted of a very bewildering manipulation of the house cat—causing her to disappear mysteriously and reappear again under his deft guidance at the controls. Into the future she had gone. William said, and I had no reason to doubt him. The cat took the matter in a calm way and seemed in no wise injured by its uncanny transit. So I left him there, fully satisfied that he was in no danger. Would to God I had smashed the machine to bits!

During the days that followed. I witnessed several more concluding experiments. Then I was called away on business. When I returned, the household was in an uproar, William had been abducted! He must have been, for he was gone.

But I immediately thought of the time-machine, and commanding the servants to cease their silly rantings, I hurried to the

laboratory. I must confess that there was a peculiar sensation of relief in my vitals (imagine feeling relief at the conviction that it was really abduction) as I saw that the machine was still there, in cold in-operation. William had said that the machine would disappear when actually used by someone within it, quite necessary for a return, of course. I had no reason to doubt his accuracy in that supposition.

Thus, for more than a month now we have been vainly trying to solve the mystery of his "abduction" with no success until this morning, when it became necessary to retrieve those unfortunate scrapbooks from the garret in search of an item desired by the newspaper.

Having them laid before me, I took an interest in paging through them to kill the inaction of eternally waiting for news that did not come. And then the photographer delivered the proofs of the snapshots I had ordered developed. I stared long at the picture of my missing son, and then laid the photo down upon the open book beside an old newsprint photo. As my eyes compared them, the terrible realization froze my very brain in my head—for the prints, though in different poses, were *identical!* I knew then that William Gregory, the murderer, was William Gregory, my son.

Impossible, you say? No, my dear McKennedy, I have considered it from every possible angle. There can be no mistake, though I have tried desperately to confute my reasoning. As if I had witnessed every action of my son on the day he disappeared, I know that he stepped into the time-machine determined on a trip into the past, perhaps himself choosing 1901 as his goal, Great God! Why did he not realize that the machine would no more travel with him than a cannon travels with its projectile? But he did not, and turning the switch was hurled backward in time to 1901, and through some misplacement of

space during those years, was precipitated into the library just as my father entered it in search of his law book. What happened then is obvious. Father, discerning an intruder, attacked immediately, actuated by his naturally impetuous nature. William, dazed by his trip and finding himself assaulted by a stranger, grasped the andiron and struck in self-defence.

I have already described what happened after that. It is all too true, and the contemplation of it is driving me mad. To think that I sentenced my own son to death for what was obviously not a criminal action, and to think that he knew me, and knew his fate, having read my scrapbooks through and through! God! I cannot stand it. What a paradoxical hell this life has become!

I clutched upon a desperate hope about an hour ago. Matter cannot exist in two places at the same time. Thus, I argued, his body could not have been consigned to the grave, to remain there while he was born and grew to manhood with that same body. If this were so, then the whole horrible thing was untrue; but my own family doctor, who is a scientist of no mean repute, assures me that a human being, in the space of seven years, retains no single atom of matter which formerly constituted his makeup, each cell having been individually replaced many times over in the natural processes of the body. Thus the clay that lies in a murderer's grave is not the flesh born of my wife.

I clutched another hope. What then of his body in manhood? Those terrible clippings; they refute with terrorizingly complete logic my every hope! For William's body was not buried. It does not lie beneath the soil. It was consigned to the lime-pit to be absolutely dissolved!

Continually ringing in my ears is that terrible phrase "What has been, must be." To me this life has become a hell of confusion.

Which is past, and which is future? If I had known of the similarity of the two young men, could I have saved him by smashing the machine? God, I do not know. The doubt is bringing madness.

At first I asked myself, "Why did he not save himself?" but then I realized that it was impossible. How could he make me, or anyone else, believe that I, who was not yet married, was his father? Yes, he knew that he could not save himself. What agonies he must have suffered. It is too terrible to think of. Horror is creeping ever closer. I have the gun in my hand. And, McKennedy, do not hope

that anyone will arrive in time to save me, for I anticipated your action, and they will not find me at home! I will not live in madness. Hell cannot be worse than that. Good-bye, McKennedy, and God have mercy on my soul.

* * *

McKennedy staggered back from the phone in horror as the sharp explosion of an automatic rang in his ears. With trembling fingers he replaced the receiver and slumped down at his desk. His awed whisper broke the silence of the room. "An' I thought he was nuts!"