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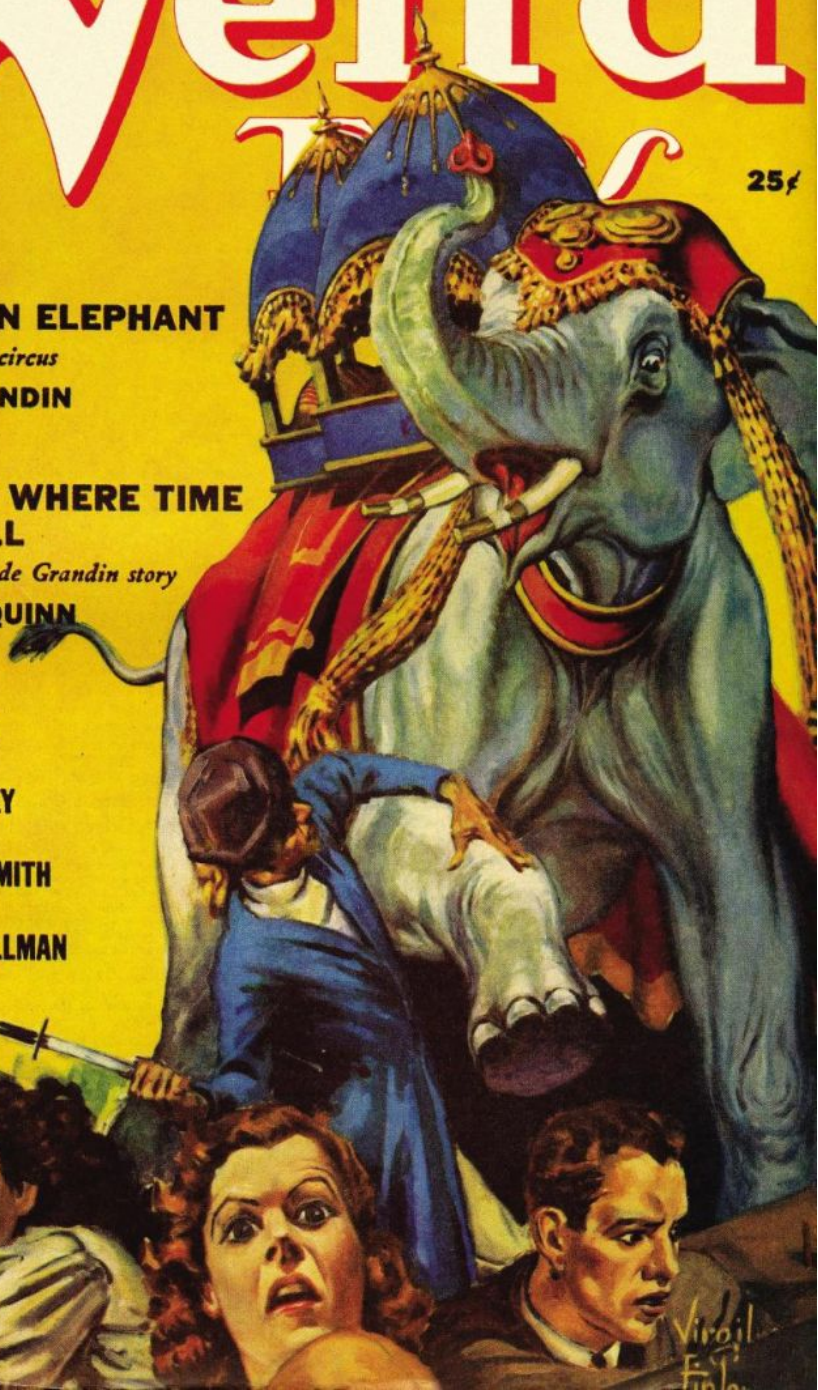
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The
Transgressor

By
HENRY KUTTNER

A curious tale of time-travel

The night was oven-hot. Thor, my Great Dane, was panting in a corner, and occasionally growling to himself. I was alone in the house.

So I thought. Thus, when I heard a tentative cough from near by I looked up in surprise—and my jaw dropped. I stared unbelievably at the face before me.

For, feature for feature, it was my own!

“Well,” said the intruder. “So it worked. I’ve conquered time!”

The dog barked.

I sprang to my feet, overturning the chair. Involuntarily my gaze went past the man to the door he had closed behind him. I knew what was behind that panel. And therefore—I guessed.

I said, “Who are you?”

“Jim Harline.”

My own name. Something of fear—dread of the unknown—must have crept into my eyes, for the man said, “Don’t be frightened——” And the voice was my own! “Surely you’re not afraid of the result of your own experiment.”

“What do you know about that?” I asked.

“You’re all ready for it, aren’t you? In about half an hour you’re planning on the final test. But—sit down.” As I dropped back into the chair Thor got quickly to his feet. His eyes were hard and brilliant. He padded to the drinking-pan by the table, but did not drink.

“My experiments have dealt with the possibility of moving about in time,” I said. “I’ve completed a model—but this—visitation!” I made a vague gesture.

“Naturally my coming surprises you.” He hesitated. “It’s difficult to explain. Our identities are confused, I think. We are the same person—and yet we’re different, because I’ve lived a half-hour longer than you have.”

“How did you get in this house?”

Indirectly he answered, “You’re ready to give your time machine the final test. It will work. You’ll project yourself half an hour backward in time. You’ll see yourself sitting there reading—as I saw you. You’ll speak—as I did.”

I snatched at an obvious straw. “How do you know this?”

“I experienced it. Just half an hour ago I was sitting where you’re sitting now, talking to a mysterious visitor who looked like my double.” Suddenly the man glanced aside at Thor. The huge dog was pacing nervously about, little flecks of foam on his jaws. “It’s hot,” he said, irrelevantly.

I looked at my visitor carefully. His body was apparently as solid and real as my own. There was only one distinguishing feature between us: a fresh cut had peeled away half an inch of skin from his forehead.

Observing my glance, the man touched the wound with his handkerchief. “Hit my head on the control lever,” he explained. “The damned machine gives you a nasty jolt when it starts. Watch out for it.” He grinned crookedly. “I forgot. You can’t. The cycle has to repeat itself.”

My thoughts were chaotic. I could not understand. Gropingly I said, “But the cycle must start some place. It started with you? You say you’ve already lived through the period of time I’m now experiencing?”

He nodded.

“Then you sat in this chair”—I patted its arm—“reading, but didn’t get interrupted by a visitor, for nobody ‘went through’ before you.”

“Hold on. I *did* get interrupted.”

“But you couldn’t have. Didn’t you start the time cycle?”

“Lord, no! I’d already traveled around the loop. Look here.” He reached for a convenient magazine and drew a figure on it—a line that intersected itself, like the letter P.

“Thus. The straight line—the vertical one—is our normal progress in time. We’re both existing, right now, at the point where the lines intersect. But you’ve reached that point normally; I haven’t. I’ve lived a half-hour longer, traveled backward in time, and moved along the loop back to the point of intersection.”

Suddenly the dog howled. I said sharply, “Quiet, Thor!”

My visitor went on after a moment, “It isn’t a paradox, really. If you were to travel back through time for thirty years, you’d see yourself as a baby. But that baby would also see you, the man who’s thirty-two years old, if just as you’re seeing me, the man who’s half an hour older than you are.” His eyes changed. “But there’s something”—he paused, staring again at the dog—“something I can’t remember—a blank space in my memory. And I’ve a feeling it’s—very important. A memory that has been eradicated . . . why should that happen?” He came close, gripping my arm with hard fingers. “It isn’t logical. There’s no reason for it.”

I stared at him. “Perhaps if you explain what you did——”

“Well, I went into the laboratory when the clock struck eight. I can remember that, but just before it is the blank spot in my memory—the part I can’t remember. I went into the lab and got into the time machine. I pulled over the lever and felt a jerking shock. I said that was how I got this cut on my head, didn’t I? Yes . . . well, then—the machine had stopped. At first I thought I’d failed. But I looked at the clock on the wall, and it showed seven-thirty instead of eight. As easy as that! I got out of the machine and came in here. You were sitting reading. . . .”

He was silent. It was very strange to see my own face set in lines of wonder and triumph and apprehension.

“Then the experiment was—will be—a success,” I said, and he grinned wryly.

“A success—yes.” He was looking at me, but far beyond. His gaze dwelt beyond earth. It looked into the unknown. And he said, “I have gone too far. I know that, now. There are laws which must not be transgressed. We may think there are ways of overcoming them, but we forget one thing. Beyond those laws we know there are others—and they may be very terrible. I think there is no room for rebels in this universe.”

Briefly the tension held us; then it snapped, and he said, “Give me a drink—a cold one. It’s damned hot.”

I mixed a highball—two of them. We looked at each other over the glasses. I noticed that the fingers of his right hand were blood-stained. The dog paced the floor, panting. Foam flecked his mouth.

My visitor drank deeply and sank into a chair. Thor paused to stare at him. The two, man and dog, gazed, and I heard a little growl rumble in the Great Dane’s shaggy throat. And suddenly the most dreadful look came over the man’s throat.

He shouted something—I don’t know what. He sprang to his feet. At the sudden movement Thor crouched. The dog’s eyes were glaring and as I saw the foam-frosted, lolling tongue I realized the truth. The heat—Thor’s refusal to drink water. . . .

Well, it was over soon. I killed Thor with a chair that splintered as it crushed his skull. But my double was gripping the table’s edge; blood bubbling from a throat torn open by the dog’s fangs.

He looked at me, and there was horror unspeakable in his eyes—a terror beyond life and beyond death. Then he came down, his outflung arms sending papers fluttering to the floor. Very slowly he slid from the table and crumpled into a quiet heap.

His wrist was pulseless. I looked down at his still face, and glanced at the dog, and finally at the door of my laboratory. I did not look away. For in that split second as I stared at the panel a brief, inexplicable shock racked me. Something seemed to move within my brain. I found myself quietly walking into the laboratory.

A little voice whispered within my head. It said, “Stop. You’ve forgotten something—something important.” I did not heed it. I did not know what I had forgotten.

In the laboratory was a high, box-shaped framework, the time machine I had created. It stood there, its bright metal gleaming in the light, and I paused to run a caressing hand over its surface. Then I climbed inside and seated myself before the control board.

The voice in my head grew fainter. I scarcely heard it. Far away it whispered urgently, “You’ve forgotten! You’ve forgotten!”

My hand went out; I pulled the control lever toward me. I felt a grinding shock, and my head jerked forward. A white-hot pain burned along my forehead. I touched it with my hand, and my fingers came away smeared with blood.

I couldn’t believe the machine had worked, but I turned to look at the clock. The hands pointed to seven-thirty. I had been hurled a half-hour backward in time.

Triumph intoxicated me. Yet somehow, far in the back of my mind, was a queer, small foreboding, knowledge of the fact that I had forgotten something—something that had happened just before I had entered the laboratory—something vitally important. . . .

I opened the door.

A man was sitting at the table reading. When I coughed he looked up. Feature for feature, the face was my own.

“Well,” I said. “So it worked. I’ve conquered time!”

The dog barked.

[The end of *The Transgressor* by Henry Kuttner]