

THE MAGAZINE OF TOMORROWNESS

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PANGBORN'S PARADOX

By DAVID MASON

So you know all the punchlines to the old kill-your-own-grandfather gag, eh? Wanna bet?

Illustrated by RICHARD KLUGA

“TEMPORAL PARADOXES,” Pangborn said, in that extra-stuffy tone he used when he wanted to give us an adequate idea of his superiority, “are not to be regarded as inconsistencies per se.”

“Why not?” demanded Doctor Randall’s voice from the depth of his wing chair. All we had been able to see of him for the past half-hour had been his legs, but apparently Pangborn’s tone had been too much. “Prove it!”

Pangborn’s tone became even more lofty. “My own theory is that such paradoxes, if reduced

to practice, would prove not to be paradoxical at all.”

“Such as the famous idea about going back and killing one’s grandparents?” Von Juntz asked, stroking his beard.

We all like to have our little oddities on the faculty at Miskatonic. Von Juntz liked to look like a nineteenth century Heidelberg. Pangborn of Physics liked to assume a personality pattern that would annoy people. Doctor Randall of the Department of Advertising Arts wrote poetry in secret. And I liked to drink. . . .

“Problem of killing grand-

parents before parents were born," I said, pouring myself another. "Question if you can be born after that. Question if you can't be born, how did you do it? Not really possible, Pangborn. You can't test it." I made a mental note to bring up the low quality of Faculty Club whiskey at the next business meeting. It had everything else a good faculty club should have: brown leather armchairs, old magazines, fresh newspapers, a dusty chess board, cut glass decanters . . . it was a place well suited for comfortable reading, talking and drinking—except for the quality of the whiskey.

"Can't kill grandpa," Doctor Randall said, from far down in his comfortable chair. "No such thing as time travel."

"You underestimate the Physics department," Pangborn told us coldly. "In spite of heavy losses to our staff—last year's treason trials cost us three of our most brilliant young men—we've made some very remarkable strides. We have what is crudely termed a time machine—although the correct term is temporal transducer. In fact we are currently conducting some very interesting researches with it."

"Then you have tried the killing of a grandfather, Herr Doctor?" Von Juntz inquired. "You have found why it cannot be done, yes?"

"We have not yet gotten around to such minor matters," Pangborn said. "But in time . . ." He began to look interested, "Ah . . . wait a minute. . . . In practice that would be. . . . Whose grandfather should we choose?" His eyes glittered. "There is always the question of risk, of course, but it would be difficult for the law to legally consider it as actually murder. My grandfather is already dead." He hesitated. "There is the possibility of disappearing."

"But," Von Juntz reminded him, "by your own statement you said it, that there is no paradox, and no risk. Grandpa would be dead, you would be alive, and there is no paradox, yes?"

"Q. E. D." Pangborn snapped. "Reduction ad absurdum."

"Et pons asinorum," Von Juntz snapped back, his beard bristling.

These exchanges would have been ever so much better if any of us had ever taken Latin. But I could see that Pangborn was ruffled.

"Very well." He bit off the words. "We'll do it."

"Whose grandfather?" asked Doctor Randall.

Pangborn's eyes glittered. "Mine, naturally. I wouldn't want to endanger any of you gentlemen. After all, it is my demonstration. I remember my grandfather jabbing me in the



belly with a great horny finger when I was too young to defend myself. Giddygiddy, he used to say, the old buzzard. Died naturally. Apoplexy with a fan dancer it was, in a hotel room at the age of ninety-three. Disgraceful. Nobody ever shot him. Don't understand why not. Long overdue." Pangborn rubbed his hands together and started for the door. "How about it? Will you gentlemen accompany me to the Physics department?"

On the way over Randall nudged me and spoke out of the side of his mouth.

"Three to one Pangborn vanishes."

It seemed like good odds. If Pangborn managed to prevent his father from being born, logically he should prevent himself from being born. But I couldn't visualize him vanishing. Common sense was against it. "I'll cover that." I gave Randall three dollars.

If Pangborn did not vanish, Randall would owe me nine. If Pangborn did not vanish I would be disappointed, and money would be some consolation.

Pangborn passed us through the security guards and into the Physics laboratories. No need to describe the temporal transducer, it looked like the usual thing in gadgets—coils, tubes, pipes, condensers, wires, tubes—with a little screen overhead that lets the

operator, who stays behind, watch what is happening to his passenger. Pangborn was extremely proud of it. He showed us all over the machine, pointing and naming every part. Von Juntz got his beard caught in a control wheel.

That made Pangborn almost good-natured.

Then he wanted to choose someone to operate the machine for him. He said my hands shook too much, and Von Juntz would not allow his beard to get within five feet of the controls, so we steadied Doctor Randall against a safety railing and instructed him how to operate the machine. Pangborn set the dials.

"There's one place where I'm certain to find Grandfather any time between 1893 and 1906," Pangborn told us. "The Andrew Jackson Saloon Bar on Decatur Street. He spent a lot of time there. Used it for his office they tell me. He was a lawyer. I've set the machine for there, for the month of September 1896. A good month to die in. Ha!" Pangborn ostentatiously checked the cylinders of a huge antique revolver.

"Forty-five caliber," Pangborn said grimly. "Poke me, will he? Ha!"

And he climbed into the machine.

All of us crowded around the screen, Von Juntz carefully holding his beard. We saw the picture

forming, the cut glass and bright gas lamps and polished wood of the Saloon Bar.

"Four to one Pangborn vanishes," Randall said suddenly, "Any takers, speak now."

I reached for my wallet.

Von Juntz said, "If he vanishes, it will be because he was never born. And if he was never born, you won't remember taking bets on him."

"Here," I said hastily to Randall, "I gave you some already. I'll hold my money, hand it back."

Randall withdrew a little. "Don't you trust me?" he asked in a hurt one. "I'll pay you if he doesn't vanish."

"Shhh," Von Juntz said. We crowded around the screen again.

The screen looked down on the bar from above and behind it, like looking in through a window set above the mirror. And at the bar was only one solitary customer, a tall lean man in a frock coat and plug hat with a cigar from which smoke curled richly, and a schooner of beer before him. He looked up at the bar mirror, and we saw a lean, evilly humorous face with the Pangborn features clearly marked on it. "Grandpa," Von Juntz whispered.

In a dark angle of the place, Pangborn himself materialized from the machine. We saw a glimmer as he raised the gun.

"See," Von Juntz whispered. "He has forgotten to uncock the safety. Now he has. Now he creeps closer. Soon now we shall know the paradox."

Grandpa Pangborn had put down his cigar. His hand had slid under the lapel of his frock coat. Just before he whirled, I realized that he had been watching Pangborn in the mirror all the time.

He whirled, his hand whipped out from beneath his lapel, and the sound of a gunshot echoed in the saloon. We had a clear view of the angry surprise on Pangborn's face before he toppled nose down into the sawdust. He was quite obviously dead.

"Whippersnapper," Grandpa Pangborn muttered. He holstered his gun and looked up, and his lean face oddly seemed to be looking straight into the peering eye of the time viewer, and into our staring eyes. We could not be seen. . . . Or could we?

Looking at us, he spoke.

"Figure that one out!" said Grandpa Pangborn. I cut the switch, and the viewer went black.

The way I see it, Pangborn vanished, but not in the right way, so Randall owes me nine dollars. But he says he won the bet, and he won't even give me back the three I handed him before Pangborn got into that fool machine.

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