

PENDULUM

by Ray Bradbury and Henry Hasse

Prisoner of Time was he, outlawed from Life and Death alike the strange, brooding creature who watched the ages roll by and waited half fearfully for--eternity?

"I THINK," shrilled Erjas, "that this is our most intriguing discovery on any of the worlds we have yet visited!"

His wide, green-shimmering wings fluttered, his beady bird eyes flashed excitement. His several companions bobbed their heads in agreement, the greenish-gold down on their slender necks ruffling softly. They were perched on what had once been a moving sidewalk but was now only a twisted ribbon of wreckage overlooking the vast expanse of a ruined city.

"Yes," Erjas continued, "it's baffling, fantastic! It--it has no reason for being." He pointed unnecessarily to the object of their attention, resting on the high stone plaza a short distance away. "Look at it! Just a huge tubular pendulum hanging from that towering framework! And the machinery, the coggerly which must have once sent it swinging . . . I flew up there a while ago to examine it, but it's hopelessly corroded."

"But the head of the pendulum!" another of the bird creatures said awedly. "A hollow chamber--transparent, glassite--and that awful thing staring out of it..."

Pressed close to the inner side of the pendulum head was a single human skeleton. The whitened skull seemed to stare out over the desolate, crumbling city as though regarding with amusement the heaps of powdery masonry and the bare steel girders that drooped to the ground, giving the effect of huge spiders poised to spring.

"It's enough to make one shudder--the way that thing grins! Almost as though--"

"The grin means nothing!" Erjas interrupted annoyedly. "That is only the skeletal remains of one of the mammal creatures who once, undoubtedly, inhabited this world." He shifted nervously from one spindly leg to the other, as he glanced again at the grinning skull. "And yet, it does seem to be almost--triumphant! And why are there no more of them around? Why is he the only one . . . and why is he encased in that fantastic pendulum head?"

"We shall soon know," another of the bird creatures trilled softly, glancing at their spaceship which rested amidst the ruins, a short distance away. "Orfleew is even now deciphering the strange writing in the book he salvaged from the pendulum head. We must not disturb him."

"How did he get the book? I see no opening in that transparent chamber."

"The long pendulum arm is hollow, apparently in order to vacuum out the cell. The book was crumbling with age when Orfleew got it out, but he saved most of it."

"I wish he would hurry! Why must he--"

"Shh! Give him time. Orfleew will decipher the writing; he has an amazing genius for alien languages."

"Yes. I remember the metal tablets on that tiny planet in the constellation--"

"Here he comes now!"

"He's finished already!"

"We shall soon know the story...."

The bird creatures fairly quivered as Orfleew appeared in the open doorway of their spaceship, carefully carrying a sheaf of yellowed pages. He waved to them, spread his wings and soared outward. A moment later he alighted beside his companions on their narrow perch.

"The language is simple," Orfleew told them, "and the story is a sad one. I will read it to you and then we must depart, for there is nothing we can do on this world."

They edged closer to him there on the metal strand, eagerly awaiting the first words. The pendulum hung very straight and very still on a windless world, the transparent head only a few feet above the plaza floor. The grinning skull still peered out as though hugely amused or hugely satisfied. Orfleew took one more fleeting look at it . . . then he opened the crumbling notebook and began to read.

MY NAME John Layeville. I am known as "The Prisoner of Time." People, tourists from all over the world, come to look at me in my swinging pendulum. School children, on the electrically moving sidewalks surrounding the plaza, stare at me in childish awe. Scientists, studying me, stand out there and train their instruments on the swinging pendulum head. Oh, they could stop the swinging, they could release me--but now I know that will never happen. This all began as a punishment for me, but now I am an enigma to science. I seem to be immortal. It is ironic.

A punishment for me! Now, as through a mist, my memory spins back to the day when all this started. I remember I had found a way to bridge time gaps and travel into futurity. I remember the time device I built. No, it did not in any way resemble this pendulum--my device was merely a huge box-like affair of specially treated metal and glassite, with a series of electric rotors of my own design which set up conflicting, but orderly, fields of stress. I had tested it to perfection no less than three times, but none of the others in the Council of Scientists would believe me. They all laughed. And Leske laughed. Especially Leske, for he has always hated me.

I offered to demonstrate, to prove. I invited the Council to bring others--all the greatest minds in the scientific world. At last, anticipating an amusing evening at my expense, they agreed.

I shall never forget that evening when a hundred of the world's greatest scientists gathered in the main Council laboratory. But they had come to jeer, not to cheer. I did not care, as I stood on the platform beside my ponderous machine and listened to the amused murmur of voices. Nor did I care that millions of other unbelieving eyes were watching by television, Leske having indulged in a campaign of mockery against the possibility of time travel. I did not care, because I knew that in a few minutes Leske's campaign would be turned into victory for me. I would set my rotors humming, I would pull the control switch--and my machine would flash away into a time dimension and back again, as I had already seen it do three times. Later we would send a man out in the machine.

The moment arrived. But fate had decreed it was to be my moment of doom. Something went wrong, even now I do not know what or why. Perhaps the television concentration in the room affected the stress of the time-fields my rotors set up. The last thing I remember seeing, as I reached out and touched the main control switch, were the neat rows of smiling white faces of the important men

seated in the laboratory. My hand came down on the switch....
Even now I shudder, remembering the vast mind-numbing horror of that moment. A terrific sheet of electrical flame, greenish and writhing and alien, leaped across the laboratory from wall to wall, blasting into ashes everything in its path!

Before millions of television witnesses I had slain the world's greatest scientists!

No, not all. Leske and myself and a few others who were behind the machine escaped with severe burns. I was least injured of all, which seemed to increase the fury of the populace against me. I was swept to a hasty trial, faced jeering throngs who called out for my death.

"Destroy the time machine," was the watchword, "and destroy this murderer with it!"

Murderer! I had only sought to help humanity. In vain I tried to explain the accident, but popular resentment is a thing not to be reasoned with.

One day, weeks later, I was taken from my secret prison and hurried, under heavy guard, to the hospital room where Leske lay. He raised himself on one arm and his smouldering eyes looked at me. That's all I could see of him, just his eyes; the rest of him was swathed in bandages. For a moment he just looked; and if ever I saw insanity, but a cunning insanity, in a man's eyes, it was then, For about ten seconds he looked, then with a great effort he pointed a bulging, bandaged arm at me.

"No, do not destroy him," he mumbled to the authorities gathered around.

"Destroy his machine, yes, but save the parts. I have a better plan, a fitting one, for this man who murdered the world's greatest scientists. "

I remembered Leske's old hatred of me, and I shuddered.

IN THE weeks that followed, one of my guards told me with a sort of malicious pleasure of my time device being dismantled, and secret things being done with it. Leske was directing the operations from his bed.

At last came the day when I was led forth and saw the huge pendulum for the first time. As I looked at it there, fantastic and formidable, I realized as never before the extent of Leske's insane revenge. And the populace seemed equally vengeful, equally cruel, like the ancient Romans on a gladiatorial holiday. In a sudden panic of terror, I shrieked and tried to leap away.

That only amused the people who crowded the electrical sidewalks around the plaza. They laughed and shrieked derisively.

My guards thrust me into the glass pendulum head and I lay there quivering, realizing the irony of my fate. This pendulum had been built from the precious metal and glassite of my own time device! It was intended as a monument to my slaughtering! I was being put on exhibition for life within my own executioning device! The crowd roared thunderous approval, damning me.

Then a little click and a whirring above me, and my glass prison began to move. It increased in speed. The arc of the pendulum's swing lengthened. I remember how I pounded at the glass, futilely screaming, and how my hands bled. I remember the rows of faces becoming blurred white blobs before me....

I did not become insane, as I had thought at first I would. I did not mind it so much; that first night. I couldn't sleep but it wasn't uncomfortable. The lights of the city were comets with tails that pelted from right to left like foaming fireworks. But as the night wore on I felt a gnawing in my stomach that grew worse until I became very sick. The next day was the same and I couldn't eat anything. In the days that followed they never stopped the pendulum, not once.

They slid my food down the hollow pendulum stem in little round parcels that plunked at my feet. The first time I attempted eating I was unsuccessful; it wouldn't stay down. In desperation I hammered against the cold glass with my fists until they bled again, and I cried hoarsely, but heard nothing but my own weak words muffled in my ears.

After an infinitude of misery, I began to eat and even sleep while traveling back and forth this way . . . they had allowed me small glass loops on the floor with which I fastened myself down at night and slept a soundless slumber, without sliding. I even began to take an interest in the world outside, watching it tip one way and another, back and forth and up and down, dizzily before my eyes until they ached. The monotonous movements never changed. So huge was the pendulum that it shadowed one hundred feet or more with every majestic sweep of its gleaming shape, hanging from the metal intestines of the machine overhead. I estimated that it took four or five seconds for it to traverse the arc.

On and on like this--for how long would it be? I dared not think of it....

DAY by day I began to concentrate on the gaping, curiosity-etched faces outside--faces that spoke soundless words, laughing and pointing at me, the prisoner of time, traveling forever nowhere. Then after a time--was it weeks or months or years?--the town people ceased to come and it was only tourists who came to stare....

Once a day the attendants sent down my food, once a day they sent down a tube to vacuum out the cell. The days and nights ran together in my memory until time came to mean very little to me....

IT WAS not until I knew, inevitably, that I was doomed forever to this swinging chamber, that the thought occurred to me to leave a written record. Then the idea obsessed me and I could think of nothing else.

I had noticed that once a day an attendant climbed into the whirring cogger overhead in order to drop my food down the tube. I began to tap code signals along the tube, a request for writing materials. For days, weeks, months, my signals remained unanswered. I became infuriated--and more persistent.

Then, at long last, the day when not only my packet of food came down the tube, but with it a heavy notebook, and writing materials! I suppose the attendant above became weary at last of my tappings! I was in a perfect ecstasy of joy at this slight luxury.

I have spent the last few days in recounting my story, without any undue elaboration. I am weary now of writing, but I shall continue from time to time--in the present tense instead of the past.

My pendulum still swings in its unvarying arc. I am sure it has been not months, but years! I am accustomed to it now. I think if the pendulum were to stop suddenly, I should go mad at the motionless existence!

(Later): There is unusual activity on the electrically moving sidewalks surrounding me. Men are coming, scientists, and setting up peculiar looking instruments with which to study me at a distance. I think I know the reason. I guessed it some time ago. I have not recorded the years, but I suspect that I have already outlived Leske and all the others! I know my cheeks have developed a short beard which suddenly ceased growing, and I feel a curious, tingling vitality. I feel that I shall outlive them all! I cannot account for it, nor can they out there, those scientists who now examine me so scrupulously. And they dare not stop my pendulum, my little world, for fear of the effect it may have on me!

(Still later): These men, these puny scientists, have dropped a microphone down the tube to me! They have actually remembered that I was once a great scientist,

encased here cruelly. In vain they have sought the reason for my longevity; now they want me to converse with them, giving my symptoms and reactions and suggestions! They are perplexed, but hopeful, desiring the secret of eternal life to which they feel I can give them a clue. I have already been here two hundred years, they tell me; they are the fifth generation.

At first I said not a word, paying no attention to the microphone. I merely listened to their babblings and pleadings until I wearied of it. Then I grasped the microphone and looked up and saw their tense, eager faces, awaiting my words.

"One does not easily forgive such an injustice as this," I shouted. "And I do not believe I shall be ready to until five more generations."

Then I laughed. Oh, how I laughed.

"He's insane!" I heard one of them say: "The secret of immortality may lie somehow with him, but I feel we shall never learn it; and we dare not stop the pendulum--that might break the timefield, or whatever it is that's holding him in thrall...."

(MUCH LATER): It has been a longer time than I care to think, since I wrote those last words. Years . . . I know not how many. I have almost forgotten how to hold a pencil in my fingers to write.

Many things have transpired, many changes have come in the crazy world out there.

Once I saw wave after wave of planes, so many that they darkened the sky, far out in the direction of the ocean, moving toward the city; and a host of planes arising from here, going out to meet them; and a brief, but lurid and devastating battle in which planes fell like leaves in the wind; and some planes triumphantly returning, I know not which ones...

But all that was very long ago, and it matters not to me. My daily parcels of food continue to come down the pendulum stem; I suspect that it has become a sort of ritual, and the inhabitants of the city, whoever they are now, have long since forgotten the legend of why I was encased here. My little world continues to swing in its arc, and I continue to observe the puny little creatures out there who blunder through their brief span of life.

Already I have outlived generations! Now I want to outlive the very last one of them! I shall!

. . . Another thing, too, I have noticed. The attendants who daily drop the parcels of food for me, and vacuum out the cell, are robots! Square, clumsy, ponderous and four-limbed things--unmistakably metal robots, only vaguely human in shape.

. . . I begin to see more and more of these clumsy robots about the city. Oh, yes, humans too--but they only come on sight-seeing tours and pleasure jaunts now; they live, for the most part, in luxury high among the towering buildings. Only the robots occupy the lower level now, doing all the menial and mechanical tasks necessary to the operation of the city. This, I suppose, is progress as these self centered beings have willed it.

. . . robots are becoming more complicated, more human in shape and movements . . . and more numerous . . . uncanny ... I have a premonition....

(Later): It has come! I knew it! Vast, surging activity out there . . . the humans, soft from an aeon of luxury and idleness, could not even escape . . . those who tried, in their rocket planes, were brought down by the pale, rosy electronic beams of the robots . . . others of the humans, more daring or desperate, tried to sweep low over the central robot base and drop thermite bombs--but the robots had erected an electronic barrier which hurled the bombs

back among the planes, causing inestimable havoc....

The revolt was brief, but inevitably successful. I suspect that all human life except mine has been swept from the earth. I begin to see, now, how cunningly the robots devised it.

The humans had gone forward recklessly and blindly to achieve their Utopia; they had designed their robots with more and more intricacy, more and more finesse, until the great day when they were able to leave the entire operation of the city to the robots--under the guidance perhaps of one or two humans. But somewhere, somehow, one of those robots was imbued with a spark of intelligence; it began to think, slowly but precisely; it began to add unto itself, perhaps secretly; until finally it had evolved itself into a terribly efficient unit of inspired intelligence, a central mechanical Brain which planned this revolt. At least, so I pictured it. Only the robots are left now--but very intelligent robots. A group of them came yesterday and stood before my swinging pendulum and seemed to confer among themselves. They surely must recognize me as one of the humans, the last one left. Do they plan to destroy me too?

No. I must have become a legend, even among the robots. My pendulum still swings. They have now encased the operating mechanism beneath a protective glassite dome. They have erected a device whereby my daily parcel of food is dropped to me mechanically. They no longer come near me; they seem to have forgotten me.

This infuriates me! Well, I shall outlast them too! After all, they are but products of the human brain . . . I shall outlast everything even remotely human! I swear it!

(MUCH LATER): Is this the end? I have seen the end of the reign of the robots! Yesterday, just as the sun was crimsoning in the west, I perceived the hordes of things that came swarming out of space, expanding in the heavens . . . alien creatures fluttering down, great gelatinous masses of black that clustered thickly over everything....

I saw the robot rocket planes criss-crossing the sky on pillars of scarlet flame, blasting into the black masses with their electronic beams--but the alien things were unperturbed and unaffected! Closer and closer they pressed to earth, until the robot rockets began to dart helplessly for shelter.

To no avail. The silvery robot ships began crashing to earth in ghastly devastation, like drops of mercury splashing on tiles....

And the black gelatinous masses came ever closer, to spread over the earth, to crumble the city and corrode whatever metal was left exposed.

Except my pendulum. They came dripping darkly down over it, over the glassite dome which protects the whirring wheels and roaring bowels of the mechanism. The city has crumbled, the robots are destroyed, but my pendulum still moves, the only moving thing on this world now . . . and I know that fact puzzles these alien things and they will not be content until they have stopped it....

This all happened yesterday. I am lying very still now, watching them. Most of them are gathering out there over the ruins of the city, preparing to leave--except a few of the black quivering things that are still hanging to my pendulum, almost blotting out the sunlight; and a few more above, near the operating machinery, concentrating those same emanations by which they corroded the robots. They are determined to do a complete job here. I know that in a few minutes they will begin to take effect, even through the glassite shield. I shall continue to write until my pendulum stops swinging. it is happening now. I can feel a peculiar grinding and grating in the cogger above. Soon my tiny glassite world will cease its relentless arc.

I feel now only a fierce elation flaming within me, for after all, this is my victory ! I have conquered over the men who planned this punishment for me, and over countless other generations, and over the final robots themselves! There is nothing more I desire except annihilation, and I am sure that will come automatically when my pendulum ceases, bringing me to a state of unendurable motionlessness....

It is coming now. Those black, gelatinous shapes above are drifting away to join their companions. The mechanism is grinding raucously. My arc is narrowing ... smaller ... smaller....
I feel ... so strange....

THE END