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Over Time's Threshold

By HOWARD WANDREI

A weird story of the fourth dimension—a tale of speeding years and an eery experiment in Professor Capal's laboratory

A CLOCK ticking in an empty house. What might that bode? Finch turned to the girl and said, "The agent told me this place has been closed up for four years."

She nodded. It was an undeniable ticking, the heavy, clipped chucking sound of a large timepiece. The sound came from the one unexplored room on the ground floor, and Finch walked with the girl toward the door of the room with some curiosity.

The uncovered furnishings of the old house were gray with dust. There had been no caretaker for these four years, and its present condition gave it a cheap place in the market, even among prevailing low prices. The dusty furnishings were of a rather respectable nature, some of them rich enough to give the girl's eyes an incipient sparkle. And those of the room in the left wing which they were approaching were especially interesting. Subconsciously Finch noted that the door of this room was peculiar among those they had tried on the ground floor, in its standing open. The two paused on the threshold of the room and looked in, harkening to the ticking of the clock.

A heavy table in the mathematical center of the room supported a large retort filled with a liquid colored a pale apple-green. The glass arm of the retort appeared to be depositing this fluid by slow drops into a fair-sized graduated glass whose capacity must have been about equal to the liquid in the retort. A drop now hung from the extended retort arm,

minute accumulations gradually inviting its fall. Finch looked at the litter of test tubes and other apparatus on the table and glanced at the book-lined walls.

"Capal's laboratory," he said. The girl looked at him inquiringly.

"Professor Capal," he said again. "He used to live in this house, and it looks as though he worked in this room."

"Oh, he used to teach at the university."

"Yes. He sort of disappeared four years ago, and the house has been vacant since."

Loud ticking filled the room, and now the two watching the clock noted its peculiar character with some astonishment. It was of unusually heavy construction, and had a broad, engraved face set with antique numerals. Around this face the two hands were describing arcs with furious irregularity. The minute hand passed in rapid movement past the numeral three, stopped dead and retreated almost to the top of the face. Then both minute and hour hands disappeared in a blurred whirl. The heavy ticking became confused; the sound was full of unaccountable interruptions and double striking and displayed as many irregularities as the movement of the hands. The weights in the case changed position uncertainly, and the motion of the pendulum could not be followed; it seemed to appear ubiquitously in its arc. The whirl of the machinery behind the face suddenly stopped. Finch automatically took out his watch for the correct time and found to his surprise that

both gave the same hour precisely, 3:10.

At this moment the girl stepped into the room to examine the clock more closely. As she crossed the threshold and Finch was about to step after her the retort deposited a drop of the green stuff in the fractionally filled beaker on the table. The hesitating hands of the clock leaped and the girl vanished.

Finch looked about blankly.

"Sherna——" he called questioningly.

The ticking sounded rhythmically, now clear, now confused as with the sound of another escapement striking somewhat faster. The hands hesitated, whirled, stopped, swung back and forth like the steadying needle of a compass.

"Sherna!" Finch ran into the room and looked about him, breathless and frightened. And now the clock ticked with precision, but terrifying things were occurring about the house. He turned to the room's long windows and looked at the sky. It had blackened in less than a minute. It was night. He looked amazed at the stars, and then turned his shocked eyes from immediately succeeding daylight. The sun had burst like thunder through the belt of Orion.

Night again succeeded. The sun became a mere arc of fire across the sky—a yellow-golden rainbow, and night was an instant's blur of darkness. The hands of the ticking clock followed precisely the progress of the sun. The alternation of night and day fell swifter and swifter, and with Finch at the window it was like looking out of the quickly winking eye of a camera. A time camera. The succession of light and darkness blended into a tone of twilight under a gray sky sliced lower and lower by the arc of the sun, as cold crept into the room, and snow fell abroad over the land. Then the arching sun mounted the sky so rapidly that its many appearances seemed one broad band of fire in the sky.

Now it was midsummer, and the hands of the clock ceased their crazy whirl and hesitated, performing aimless arcs back and forth across the circled numbers of the face. This happening had almost the appearance of malice, as if to allow the man time to take account of his disaster.

FINCH looked about him. The room seemed the same; there was a thickening of the dust if anything. He wrote "Finch" in the dust on a free end of the apparatus-littered table, and noticed the new accumulation of green stuff at the end of the retort arm.

Capal had been a physicist, and this arrangement of liquid and glass looked like one of his remote experiments in chemistry. Finch thrust his forefinger into the liquid the beaker had collected, and withdrew it hastily. The stuff was so cold it burned, and pain rushed up his arm like a train of exploding needles. In the summer sky the sun marked the month as June, but Finch and the girl had entered the room in early August. He believed nothing, but accepted everything under the name of phenomena.

At the university Capal had propagated a number of scientifically malodorous ideas, and was accounted a trifle mad; Finch pleasantly conjectured that the professor had been tricked by his own queer notions, and wondered what his disappearance had to do with his laboratory.

The retort was mounted upon legs that separated it from the table by almost an inch. To one side was a clockwork mechanism screwed firmly to the table. Projecting from the side was a free metal arm, to the end of which was fastened a small plate of some reddish composition that glinted with metal filings. This plate would swing under the base of the retort, but a test-tube rack had fallen and blocked its progress. Copper wires led from binding-posts on the clockwork to a series of

jars of colorless liquid ranged along the side of the apparatus.

The girl had vanished before his eyes, and he himself had vanished from his own time. Where was she? Where Capal was. And Capal? Finch had good nerves, and knew the uselessness of dashing about looking for the girl aimlessly. He was caught in a trap, and the spring was set by Capal. The phenomena that played in this room were incident to the professor's clutter of glass and clockwork, and it was by means of these that he would find normality. He was ready to follow any adventure through to its completion, and now ascertained that the clockwork was in order by pushing out the metal arm to the limit of its swing. The composition plate was carried forward by clicking little wheels until it met the test-tube rack again.

As he was about to remove the rack he noticed the arm of the retort, and decided to start evenly by cleaning off the small quantity of liquid that had collected at its mouth. His finger tip wiped the glass, and at the contact his arm jerked convulsively with electric shock as he caught sight of the girl standing opposite him, looking about wildly.

Finch retreated from the table confusedly and called the girl's name. The clock's ticking blurred into one continuous sound of speaking metal, and the hands spun hazily. The room rocked and reeled. Again the world was in twilight, and in the speeding seasons Finch alternately shook with cold and perspired in summer heat. He sneezed violently; he was aware of a dim, avalanchian roar that clarified and advanced portentously. The old house crashed about his ears, having run into complete decay in a matter of minutes, and he choked in a chaos of dust and falling, rotten timbers.

Now he found himself prostrated among ruins that dwindled and supported

vegetation even before his eyes. As he scrambled to his feet on a level of crumbled wood and mortar, howling chaos dinned in his ears, and then the world was calm and he was looking out over a late autumn wilderness.

There was no house; there was no city about him, and an ancient cottonwood sank its wrinkled trunk in the ground where the table had stood. A terrific shock tumbled him to the ground and when he arose the world was cold and the sun directly overhead was a great, dim-glowing mass that shed at most a red twilight.

Far off on the horizon was the glow of flame. A creeping blanket of smoke marked some great fire. About a hundred yards away, standing beneath another huge cottonwood, was the figure of a man anxiously examining the place all around.

He wore tattered clothes, and spectacles reflected light as he turned his head. A great beast of some odd canine species tightened a leash he gripped in one hand. The animal saw Finch and growled: the man looked up and shouted. Whereupon the beast jumped against the leash, and man and dog beat their way up the knoll toward Finch. All his skin prickled and his throat stiffened in fright.

"Stop!" he screamed.

"I'm Capal!" shouted the other. "Don't move! You *can't* move!"

Finch shuddered whitely. He heard a confusion of syllables, something about "clockwork," and looked around dazed at the suddenly present room of the old house. A drop was hanging from the arm of the retort. It fell, sparkled globularly on the table of liquid in the glass, and then became part of it. As he hastily ran through the door and sprawled on the floor outside he thought he heard the girl call his name. At which he raised his abraded cheek from the floor and looked

back, but the room was empty. He lay there for long and long, sleeping heavily through the early hours of the morning.

HE WAKENED with the sun pouring through the doorway, shafting the spot his body occupied. His face lay closely against the floor. His cheek hurt with raw soreness.

"God! God! God!" he said, and turned stiffly to look into the room, sitting up. A drop of green fell from the retort and the girl's body appeared on the floor, twisted angularly.

"Sherna!" He started to his feet and she disappeared. He stopped at the threshold, muttering to himself. The dust in which he had written his name, he noted grimly, was undisturbed. Then, burying his face in his arms and leaning against the wall, he listened to the aimless, staccato chucking of the clock.

The sportive changes in the room mocked any reasoning, and Finch was hungry. After walking around the empty house for a time, absently combing his disordered hair with his fingers, he left the place slowly and took his way to a near-by restaurant. The reality of food made Capal's laboratory seem exceedingly remote. But the girl was gone. *Where?*

Was that really Capal he had seen running up that lonely knoll? What cursed beast was that with him?

This time Finch circled the house and stood on the ledge that footed the windows of the laboratory. He could hear the clock ticking through the panes, like a mechanical heart. Otherwise everything was quiet. The windows were curious in themselves. They didn't open, and the panes were of quartz-glass. The place was built solidly, and would last for a long time. He glued his ear to the glass and listened to Capal's strange clock for a few minutes, and then peered closely at the only other significant object visible—

the retort. At the end of its arm was a glimmer of green liquid.

He dropped from the window and walked across the unkept lawn to the front steps. Here he looked at his watch and noted that the girl had been absent for nearly sixteen hours. He had awakened at about six o'clock, just as a drop had fallen. Last night one fell at five, when they entered the room, and again at about ten, because of the modicum he removed with his finger. It took about four hours for one drop to accumulate, granting one had fallen while he had been asleep. So. His worried face suddenly straightened. He had seen the girl when he touched the retort, and when the drop fell as he awakened this morning; and heard her voice as he was leaving the room. Coincidences.

Hurriedly leaving his seat on the stoop he jumped the front steps. He snatched open the front door, dashed madly down the hall, and cut through the living-room into the left wing. About ten feet from the laboratory door he caught sight of the girl lying in the same position in which he had seen her last. He shouted and dived headlong through the yawning door as another green drop fell into the beaker.

His body sprawled into the table and he stood up dazed to find himself once more in the room alone. Thereupon he stumbled toward the door. The capricious clock again forecast the unknown with its spinning hands and syncopated ticking.

THE hill on which Capal's house was built flattened, and suffocating, humid masses of foliage crowded the spongy earth. Finch, lying prone, looked wearily and worried on the blanketed, peaty leaves and vegetation covering the ground, and saw near his face black beetles and a fat spider crawling horribly. A train of soft red insects about the size of peas mounted his arm on their clinging,

tentacle-like legs, and licked his shuddering flesh with little red tongues like small flames. He shook them off, and rising to his feet stamped on the lot, and dispatched the bloated spider and all the insects within the area the room would enclose. Then he fearfully returned to the spot his body had occupied when he first recognized this new change.

Here he stood waiting patiently, resolved that these things were so. First, two objects can not occupy the same space at the same time. Second, every four hours the retort deposited a magical green drop in the receptacle under the arm, and time momentarily identified itself with the fall of the drop. It was either Capal's scientific necromancy or coincidence, and Finch didn't care to dispute existence with the table or book-case. And leaving the room might mean never returning.

For four hours he would be lost in time, and therein he was prey to everything about him. He closed his eyes in a savage agony of nostalgia. A curious sensation in his feet attracted his attention. Looking down he saw the peat-blanketed ground mounting his legs graspingly. All around were palisades of trees, and the surface of the land was jungled with brush and vines. A huge creeper the size of his wrist commenced life at the base of a smooth-boled tree near by and careered through the air with dizzy life, whipping and cracking as it grew. The peat-level mounted to his knees. He stood stiffly while a shaggy beast hurtled past him, pursued by a barking uproar of wild dogs. He listened to the snarling tragedy dully. The level of earth withdrew suddenly, and whole stands of trees disappeared.

Time in retrograde? Cursing Capal's genius he sat weakly on the ground as he thought of going back and back and back. But there was little time after all to wonder whether the influence of the lost pro-

fessor's apparatus were limited or not. There was just time to see a stagnant expanse of water, soupy and green and crawling with life. The damp, heavy atmosphere was unbearable. Upward gushes of moisture-laden air choked his lungs and spun his brain. The sun flamed whitely, and the forest reeked and shimmered with wisps of steam. Then the rushing vegetation swept in and buffeted him so that he stood on his feet against the billowing foliage. A lithe, active vine whirled through the air and burst through the fleshy part of his arm. Finch clutched futilely at it, crying out at the pain; the vine had already disappeared in the shuttling years.

Another period was running to its close. Finch looked at his watch, and stooped purposefully in one of time's hesitating moments to pick up from the ground a handy water-rotted root. He heard the ticking of the clock, and the laboratory of Capal's house formed instantly.

He stood anxiously eyeing the clock and retort, gripping the root. The arm gleamed greenly, and a drop of liquid hung ready to fall as the hands of the clock ceased their spasmodic whirling and swung back and forth over the twenty-first hour since the phenomena had begun. Finch gripped the root, poised to throw, while the skipping noise of the clock resolved itself into regular, heavy ticking. He looked eagerly for the girl, and now the hands were almost at a dead stop. The ticking became a slow hammering.

Finch trembled; with nervous accuracy he flung the root at the glass works on the table as the body of the girl appeared at his feet.

Quickly he stooped to lift the girl from the floor, though speed was no longer necessary. The root struck the retort squarely and smashed it into a green soup of liquid and shattered glass. The beaker

was raked from the table along with the wired jars, and a tinkle of dropping and breaking test-tubes and glass rods accompanied him as he left the room.

Where the green stuff touched the table the varnish fumed and fumed and blackened.

The clock stopped.