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The Time-Traveler

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

What would you do if you were given a chance to influence events so that you could live the past over again?

IF HE had his life to live over again, and especially one certain day in his college career back in Cambridge, would he rescue his room-mate from the icy waters of the Charles River, as he had done on that particular day?

Professor John D. Smith turned this question bitterly over in his mind. For he had just received a blow, the crowning indignity of a long series of indignities at the hands of that ungrateful room-mate!

The blow consisted in a letter from the board of regents, informing him that Paul Arkwright (that room-mate), rather than himself, had been chosen to fill the vacancy as dean of the mathematics department. The letter went on to suggest tactfully that, if Professor Smith objected to serving under a junior, his resignation would be accepted, although regretfully.

This last was too much!

Smith exploded to his wife, "Mary, I can see Paul's hand in this, the dirty crook! Not content with beating me out of the position, he even wants to get me off the faculty, in addition. It's the last straw! Why didn't I let him drown ten years ago?"

UP TO ten years ago, the two men had been bosom friends: John Smith, the student; and Paul Arkwright, the athlete and handshaker. Then came the day when Paul had upset his rowing-shell, and John had plunged into the frigid stream to save Paul's life.

Some philosopher has said: "To make

a man love you, let him do you a favor; to make him hate you, do a favor for him."

This had proved true in this instance. Smith adored his room-mate all the more. But Arkwright became secretly embittered that he, an athlete, had been rescued by a mere grind, especially as the Boston newspapers all featured that phase of the story.

John Smith was graduated with honors, and received an appointment to a Western university. He secured for his friend a position on the same faculty; which favor still further intensified Smith's love and Arkwright's hate. The latter, as soon as he was firmly established, began bootlicking the regents and neglecting Smith. As Smith stood in the way of his further ambition, Smith must be eliminated, gratitude or no gratitude.

So when Smith published his first big bit of research, Arkwright supplied a footnote pointing out a fundamental flaw. When Smith published his second thesis, his ex-friend called attention to the fact that the theory was old, and hinted that Smith had deliberately plagiarized it.

Yet even so, Smith was merely grieved, rather than resentful. But now came the last straw, and his long-suffering love for his old chum turned to hate.

Mrs. Smith was desolated by the situation.

Said she, "Of course, you will have no difficulty getting a good position in some other college. But I love this town. We have many friends here. And we shall

have to sell our beautiful house. Oh, the ungrateful wretch!"

"'He who expects gratitude hath not conferred a favor,'" quoted Smith, adding bitterly, "But Paul might, at least, have given me a square deal."

THAT evening his colleague, Dr. Willis, called to condole with him, and to take his mind off his troubles by staging one of their periodic quarrels about relativity.

Assuming a gayety which he did not feel, Smith recited the following limerick:

There was a young lady named Bright,
Who could travel much faster than light.
She set out one day
In a relative way,
And arrived on the preceding night.

Dr. Willis, horrified at this sacrilege, protested: "If you will persist in refusing to accept the Einstein theory, please, please use argument, rather than arrant flippancy!"

"Very well," said Smith, "here goes for some argument. If, as you say, time is a dimension, like length, breadth and thickness, why can't we go backward and forward through time, the same as we can in the other three directions?"

"It's not the fault of time," Willis replied, "but is merely due to our own limitations. God can view all time and space as one complete whole, so who knows but that some human beings, by virtue of the divine spark within them, may occasionally be able to travel backward through time?"

"Bosh!" objected Smith.

But Willis persisted, "Isn't memory really a sort of traveling backward through time?"

"No, it isn't!" asserted Smith positively; "for, if it were, then we could go back to a past event in memory, change the event in the light of our present

knowledge, and then return to the present and enjoy the fruits of that change."

To himself he added, "If I could go back into the past, there is one event which I should most certainly change: my rescue of Paul Arkwright!"

Late that night he fell asleep, still cursing his ungrateful chum.

PROFESSOR SMITH dreamed that he was a college boy again, standing on a bridge over the Charles River, watching an athletic youth navigate the stream in a single-scutt racing-shell. The air was crisp and cold. He saw a submerged log just ahead of the rower, and shouted a warning. But it was too late. The craft struck and capsized. No danger, though, for Paul was as expert a swimmer as he was a rower.

The dream was as vivid as though it were real! To the dreamer it was actually real; he had no idea that he was merely dreaming.

As Smith looked, the swimmer's face suddenly contorted and his head went under. As he came to the surface again, he cried in a strained voice, "Cramps! Help!"

"Coming, Paul!" shouted Smith, casting off his coat and leaping onto the parapet of the bridge.

But then something stayed him, some premonition, or an Einsteinian memory of the future, who can say which?

"Sink, you damned scoundrel!" Smith shouted; and jumping down from the parapet again, he put on his coat and walked briskly away, without even glancing back at the drowning man.

PROFESSOR SMITH awoke in a sweat of horror, for he had dreamed that he had deliberately let his best friend drown. He switched on the light and shuddered. Then he remembered all that this false

friend had done to injure him in the years that had followed that drowning, from which he had really rescued the friend, instead of deserting him as in the dream. And with the recollection of all those ungrateful indignities, he sincerely wished that the dream were true, and that the truth had been only a dream.

But no such luck, for there on his dresser lay the fateful letter from the regents, complete proof of his friend's faithlessness!

Smith reached for the letter, and opened it; then rubbed his eyes and looked again. For the letter from the board of regents took pleasure in informing him of his selection as dean of mathematics, the coveted position!

"This must be some more of the same dream," Smith thought, "for this is what would have happened if I had let that beast drown, instead of saving his ungrateful hide as I did."

To see if the illusion still held, he got up and went over to the bookcase, which held the bound copies of the *Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society*. Taking out one well-thumbed volume, he turned to the page where Paul Arkwright's damning note had pointed out the fallacy in Smith's thesis. There stood the thesis and the note, but the note was very mild, and was by the editor instead of by Arkwright.

Professor Smith turned to his second article in another volume. Sure enough, there was the note about the German anticipation of his ideas, but this note too was by the editor, and it contained no veiled accusation of intentional plagiarism.

Professor Smith smiled. The dream was going good! So he looked up Arkwright's name in the college catalog, only to find no such person among the faculty. Even Paul's mathematics courses

were all listed as given by others. Smith's smile became a grin.

The gray light of morning was beginning to show. He dressed quietly, then sneaked downstairs, and getting into his car, drove out to the new subdivision, where Paul Arkwright's house was being built. But the lot stood vacant, and still held a "for sale" sign.

About the time that Professor Smith reached home again, he began to realize that he was awake and not dreaming. And then he began to worry. Things like this just don't happen in real life! Yesterday Paul had blocked his promotion; today all trace of Paul had been wiped from the face of the earth. Or else he himself was losing his mind.

His one hope lay in his wife. She would, she *must*, remember their despairing conference of the night before!

At breakfast she appeared, looking worried; and no wonder, with him traipsing off in the car in the early morning, when usually she had difficulty getting him out of bed in time for breakfast!

He noticed her tense look, and it cheered him, for he interpreted it as being due to the letter of the night before. But still he could not be sure.

So he said in a level tone, "Do you remember that letter from the regents last night?"

To his surprise, his wife brightened at once.

"Indeed I do!" she said. "Isn't it splendid! You acted like a kid when you read it to me. And didn't we have a wonderful celebration-party together downtown! A regular second honeymoon. To you, the promotion means the fulfilment of your ambitions. And to me it means that we shall soon be able to pay off the mortgage on our home. Oh, John, isn't it glorious!"

"But how about Paul Arkwright?" he asked, bewildered.

"You poor dear," she sympathized, "it's just like you to grieve over your old room-mate in your hour of triumph. I wish that I had known him. He must have been quite a fellow, to judge from the way you have always praised him. He would be so glad, I am sure, if he were alive today, to know of your success."

Professor Smith gave it up! He passed a bewildered hand across his brow. He would accept the gift of the gods without question. Paul's death would never be on his conscience, for he knew in his heart of hearts that he had actually saved Paul ten years ago, and that letting Paul drown had been only a figment of last night's dream.

And yet had it been merely a dream? As the day wore on, Professor Smith began to believe that some probably unfounded premonition had caused him actually to kill his beloved and trusting room-mate, years ago; and that the long chain of ungrateful indignities at the hands of that room-mate had been the dream, a mere invention of his imagination, conjured up by some defense-mechanism in his brain, to justify his dastardly act.

In spite of the congratulations which were showered upon him because of his promotion, he became more and more morose and harassed during the day. By evening he was a wreck!

THAT night the same dream came again. Once more John Smith, the college grind, stood on the parapet overlooking the Charles River, and watched

his athletic room-mate, Paul Arkwright, struggling amid the ice-cakes.

"If I save him," the thought flashed through Smith's mind, "he will be ungrateful. He will hound me and ruin my career. But if I let him drown, his death will haunt me forever."

"Coming, Paul!" he cried, and dived into the swirling stream.

PROFESSOR SMITH awoke, feeling very proud of himself. He had saved Paul Arkwright's life.

But had he?

There lay the letter from the regents. That letter would tell the tale.

Fearfully Smith arose, and approached the letter as though it had been a poisonous serpent. Gingerly he reached out for the envelope. For a moment he held it, not daring to look inside. But at last, with an effort, he took out the letter and unfolded it. With a further effort, he looked at it and read it carefully.

Then he actually smiled with relief!

The letter was in its old original form, informing him of Paul Arkwright's appointment as Dean, and tactfully suggested his own resignation. He could stand it now, for his conscience was clear. There were worse things in life than a lost job!

Professor Smith then remembered his dispute with Dr. Willis on the Einstein theory two evenings ago, and his grin became even broader.

"Won't Willis be interested!" said he to himself. "I've twice gone back into time, and have twice changed my entire career." Then he smiled ruefully, and added, "And yet how can I ever prove it to anyone?"

