

# **BLIND TIME**

**By George O. Smith**

## Blind Time

The man behind the large, polished desk nodded as Peter Wright entered. "Wright," he said, "the Oak Tool Works will require an adjuster. You're new in this office, but I've been given to understand that you have experience, are willing, intelligent, and observing. The Oak Tool Works has a special contract, and it is always taken care of by Mr. Delinge who happens to be having a vacation in an unaccessible spot. Therefore, you will pinch-hit for him."

"I understand."

The president of Interplanetary Industrial Insurance nodded.

"Good," he said. "You are to be at their Charles Street plant at eight o'clock tonight. They are to have an accident then."

Peter Wright nodded. He turned to go, his head mulling over the myriad of questions used by the average insurance adjuster. The questions designed to uncover any possible fraud. Those designed to place the full blame of the mishap, to ascertain whether it were covered by the existing contract, to determine the exact and precise time of the accident—

"What?" he yelled, turning back to the executive.

The president of I.I.I. nodded wearily.

"I heard you right?" asked Peter incredulously.

Edwin Porter nodded.

"But look, sir. An accident, by definition, is an unforeseen incident, which by common usage has come to be accepted as misfortunate, although the term 'accident' may correctly be applied to—"

"Wright, after you have been to the Oak Tool Works, you will become violently anti-semantic."

"But look, sir. If this accident is forecast with certainty, why can't it be averted?"

"Because it has happened already."

"But you said eight o'clock."

"I did," said Porter. "And I mean it."

"But ... but it is now about three-thirty in the afternoon. At eight o'clock this evening there is to be an accident that has happened already. The Oak Tool Works is in this same time-zone; they're running on Central Standard Time, too. So far as I know, the Oak Tool Works is not manufacturing time machines, are they?"

Porter grinned despite his weariness. "No, Oak, is not manufacturing time machines."

"I am still in gross ignorance. If anybody is capable of truly predicting the future on the basis of ten percent accuracy, he'd put the insurance companies out of business—unless they hired him."

"The future, in some senses, can be predicted," said Porter.

"Only on a statistical basis," answered Wright. "The prediction that tomorrow will arrive at precisely such and such an instant is a prediction based upon the statistical experience gained by several thousand years. So is the prediction of what will happen when

sulphuric acid and potassium nitrate are mixed. But an accident, sir, is unpredictable by definition. Therefore he who can predict an accident is a true prognosticator who needs no statistical experience to bolster up his forecasting."

"Wright, this argument gets nowhere. It, incidentally, is why Delinge always handled the Oak contract. He knew, and there was never an argument. No, I'll tell you no more, Wright. You'll be incredulous anyway until you've seen it in person. Eventually, you'll understand."

"I doubt it," replied Peter. "Seems to me that there are a couple of very obvious factors. One, if an accident can be predicted, it can also be avoided. Two, if such an accident is foreseen and nothing is done about trying to avert it, then it is a matter of gross negligence and the contract may be voided on those grounds."

"With but one exception to your statements, I agree," said Porter. "The accident that will take place at eight o'clock has already happened."

"What you really mean is," said Peter Wright, more by way of question than by statement, "is that the accident has occurred but will not become evident until eight?"

"I'd hate to try to explain it in a few words. Let us try by analogy. A man atop of the mountain sees an avalanche start toward a railroad track. The avalanche takes out the track, preventing a meeting between two emissaries on a vital question. The vital question is not settled, and two countries go to war. In the war, one country discovers a means of nullifying gravity, which after the war is used to start interplanetary travel. Several years after interplanetary travel starts, the rare metals are discovered in plenty

and the cost of shipping is such that the monetary system fails and the system enters a trying period of depression. Now, could you, a man suffering because of the depression, go back and turn aside the avalanche?"

"No, but I fail to see the connection."

"There isn't any, really. In that case the depression was due to a concatenation of events. In the case at the Oak Tool Works, the accident per se has already happened, but it will happen at eight o'clock. You, Peter Wright, will witness the accident that will happen and make a suitable settlement."

"Let's hire the prognosticator," suggested Wright.

"The laboratory is working full time on a means of utilizing the principle in our business. To date they are not successful. For me, I hope they are never successful. I'll stick to the statistical experience, since true prognostication depends upon some sort of pre-destination, which if true makes a mockery of all effort."

"All right," grumbled Peter Wright. "I'm going. What sort of accident is ... will it be?"

"Go prepared for anything from simple abrasion to loss of limb. I doubt the possibility of death, but—"

"I give up," groaned Wright.

"Where's Delinge?" asked the man at the Oak Tool Works.

"Vacationing on Mars, I believe."

"No offense, young man. I'd prefer him only because he has experience in this. I'll have to spend some time in explaining to you, as a newcomer, just what really goes on."

"What I'd like to know," said Wright, "is some means of averting these predictable accidents."

"We've tried. We've also failed."

"Look, Mr. Simpkins, I'm of the legal profession. I am not too much of a scientist, and I know about nothing regarding machinery—let alone the kind of plant that makes tools that make tools. I took a course in mech, of course, and forgot it as soon as I made my grade."

"Do you know what a blind rivet is?"

"Ah ... er ... one that can't be seen from both sides?"

"Right. A sealed tank, for instance, usually has a manhole in it for the buckler. The buckler holds a bucking tool against the rivet while the riveter rams it over. Similarly, bolting structures together requires that a counterthrust or torque be applied to the nut or bolt on the other side. Unless the structure is equipped with tapped holes, which are expensive and cannot be made with driller beams."

"Driller beams?"

"An outgrowth of the war laboratory. What used to be called a Buck Rogers. Doesn't really disintegrate the metal, of course, but dissipates the binding energy between molecules and lets the metal float away in a molecular gas, driven by its own heat energy. The beams are sharply defined as to diameter and depth of penetration;

you can set 'em to a thousandth, though it takes cut and try methods to do it. We don't really drill or cut metal any more. We beam-drill it and beam-cut it. It's possible to set a screw-cutting beam, but tapping a three-quarter inch hole is not for any construction company."

"I follow."

"Well, in setting blind screws and blind rivets, we have a method whereby the bucker need not crawl around on the inside. Actually, we don't use a bucker any more. The riveter does it all from one side."

"I've heard of blind rivets."

"This is not a self-setting rivet," said Simpkins. "This is a real rivet-set system. Wait, I'll show you one."

Simpkins snapped on the inter-communicator. "Ben? Look, Ben, we've got a new man from I.I.I. here who doesn't know the ropes. Can you bring up a blindy?"

"Sure, but it will be dangerous."

"I'll have the signs posted."

"O.K.," answered Ben. "I'll be up in a minute."

"Look, have you got one that is about to reform?"

"I would get that kind anyway. No sense in tying up the corridor."

"O.K."

It was about a minute later, no more, when a knock came at the door. Simpkins called for the knocker to enter. The door opened

and a man in overalls stuck his head in. There was a grin on his face and a smudge of grease on his nose. "Can't, Joe," he said. "You didn't leave the door open."

"I couldn't be going to forget that?"

Peter Wright swallowed. "Going to forget?" he gasped.

"Ben," said Simpkins in a very tired tone, "through the door glass, huh? Let's show this man what we're up against."

"Right."

Simpkins snapped the communicator. "Tony? Get a new glass for my office ready."

"How soon?"

"Within the hour."

"Right. I'll have it cut and waiting."

Peter shook his head, and then watched Ben enter with the riveting tool. He looked at it, and Ben, with a grin, held it up in front of Peter's nose.

There was a regular air ram with handle. That was standard. But the second air ram hitched in opposition alongside of the standard job was new. It projected out, its business end projecting in a caliper arc beyond the standard ram, and returning to buck the standard ram. With this tool, one man could both ram the rivet and buck it with the same tool, and, since both hammer and anvil were driven, the effort was in opposition mechanically, and no great effort would be required of the operator.

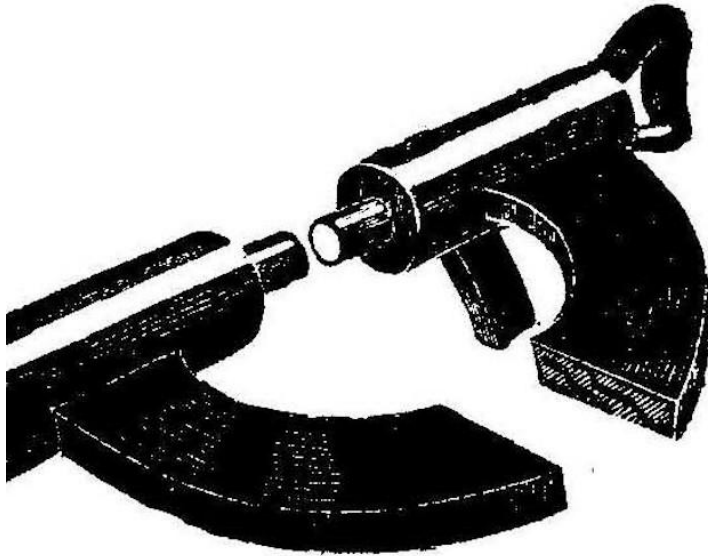


But the thing that stopped Peter Wright cold was the ... the—

The missing link!

Several inches of the caliper were missing.

Ben nodded.



Peter reached forward gingerly and passed his fingers through the space. He felt of the ends. They were microscopically smooth, true planes of cleavage. The far end, that acted as anvil for the main ram was solid and immobile despite being separated from the framework by six inches of—nothing.

"You see," said Ben, "we need only a small port in the item we're building. For instance—" and Ben opened the closet door a crack, slid the far end inside, and then closed the door. He shoved

forward and rapped the door panel with the main ram. Then pulled back and—

Rapped the inside of the door panel with the hidden end.

"If we were riveting, now, we could slip in our rivet and pull the trigger. Follow?"

"I follow, but where's the missing piece? What holds it that way?"

"The missing piece is coming," said Ben, retrieving his instrument and sitting down.

"I ... ah—" started Joe Simpkins, and then taking Peter Wright's arm in a viselike grip, pointed dramatically to his office door. "The wind," he gasped.

Wright shook his head. It was far too much for him. He was strictly out of his element, and struggling madly to keep up. The door, he saw, was swinging shut, propelled by the wind. He recalled what they had said at the portal upon entry, something about the door should be open. With a shout and a leap, Peter raced for the door.

It slammed, and Peter grabbed for the knob.

Then the glass erupted in his face; in shards it fell to the floor, and a metal piece came soaring through the air, through the glass, and circled the room. Peter's jaw was slack as he watched it flying about with no apparent plan. It poised for a minute before his chair, where Ben had held up the blindy riveter for his inspection. In Peter's imagination, he saw himself sitting there, passing his ghostly fingers through the spot where that piece of steel now hung immobile. It headed for the closet, and Ben, watching, opened the

door wide. The piece slid in, moved this way and that, rapped forward against nothing and then rapped backwards toward the room—against nothing, and then floated rapidly toward the riveter itself.

With precision it approached the riveter. It came to rest easily, slipping into place with no shock, and the cleavage lines disappeared. The blindy was complete again.

"See?" said Simpkins.

"Yeah," gulped Peter, weakly.

Laconically, a workman entered, cleaned up the glass on the floor, and started to replace the shattered panel.

"I see—but I don't really believe it," said Peter, flopping into his chair.

The two men laughed uproariously.

Ben sat down and Simpkins started. "You see, the time field," he said by way of explanation. "I haven't the vaguest notion of how it works or why. I admit it. But what does happen is that during the workday, the missing sections of all blindy tools are stored in the tool room. At the end of the day, their respective tools are returned to the tool room where they restore completely. About seven to eight o'clock, the midsections emerge from the tool room and go through the motions made by the entire tool, eventually following their ah ... owners ... back to the tool room where they join. At this point, those tools required for use on the following day are placed in the temporal treater, and treated for whatever period of action is required."

"If it takes four hours for work, they're treated for four hours," put in Ben.

"And once the day's work is finished, the work itself must be moved, since where the tool fits across a barrier, now the missing piece occupies that same space. If it does not find room, the man handling the tool several hours before will not be able to set his tool."

"Which was why I couldn't enter with the riveter," added Ben.

"It acts quite normally," said Simpkins, though with some doubt. "You couldn't bring the thing through a barrier if no time-difference exists. Actually, there is a temporal offset in the thing. It may pass through the same space as another time, but not at the same time."

"And you can't lick it," said Ben solemnly. "I purposely left the door open. But if I had really left the door open, I'd have had no resistance in the first place—I found no trouble in hooking it over the closet door—because when the mislink appeared, I opened the door for it. It does help, sometimes," grinned the shop foreman, "because we can tell when a piece of work is not going to be moved. Then it impedes the work."

"How do you know whether the impedance caused by not moving the work is responsible for the work not having been moved?" asked Simpkins, wonderingly.

"I don't mind being on either horn of a dilemma," said Ben. "But I've yet to see the dilemma that I'd ride both horns simultaneously on."

"Um, a bad animal, the dilemma," laughed Simpkins. "Well, Wright, I trust the demonstration was successful?"

"Successfully confusing," admitted the insurance adjuster. "I gather that the injured party got in the way of a missing link?"

"Whoever it will be was in the way of a mislink from a box-car crane."

"Bad, huh?"

"Could be—we'll know in a while."

Ben lit a cigarette and said: "The box-car crane is a gadget made possible by the temporal treating. Prior to its use they put heavy machinery into the box car by running to the door on a crane and then they dropped it on a dolly and slid and levered it inside and in place. Now they have a crane with a mislink between the pulley block and the grab hook. They hook it on, lift it up, and slide it inside the car, suspended on the mislink that permits the roof of the car to intervene."

"And the victim fell afoul of one of these?"

Ben nodded.

"You're absolutely certain?"

"Of course not," he said. "A number of things might have caused the trouble. This one is a boom-type crane. The mislinks are in the booms, and when it was swinging back from dropping a case inside, it hit something."

"Something? Can this be identified?"

"With a minor interference, we can feel it," said Simpkins. "With a mislink screwdriver, we can feel the interference. If it is hard, we know that someone has—or will drop something in the way."

"And if it is soft, and moves, you can estimate it to be animal," added Ben.

"Can't you probe with a feeler of some sort?"

"We do—and did. There was a body on the ground after the accident."

"No identification possible?"

"None. Probing with a rod in the dark makes identification difficult. We've tried to make some sort of study, such as wearing a magnetic badge with a key-impression on its face—the magnetic to locate and the key to identify, but frankly," and Simpkins frowned deeply, "it's psychologically dangerous. The accident can not be averted. After all, it has happened. And we tried it once, and the man who was hurt—well, knowing he was to be hurt, he went into a mental funk far worse than the accident."

"Why didn't you send him home or have him guarded over carefully?"

"We tried, kept him guarded closely. Aside from putting him in an air-tight case, we did about everything. When the accident occurred—well, he and his guards went to watch the first time that the thing could be fooled.

"It happened, all right," said Simpkins. "First, another man caught a mislink on his shoulder, which laid him out slightly. That, we thought, was it! And if it was, the time-factor was all screwed up.

But we all ran forward to measure, and as we did, our man got clipped with another. The first accident had gone unnoticed by the operator."

"How can you tell that such an accident will happen?" asked Peter. "Seems to me that a hundred tons of crane might not notice a few pounds of human in its way."

"We erect guard-wires that register. That is for one reason only. We use it to summon the medicos and the hospital ambulance, and prepare for action. That's about all we can do."

"I wonder if you could take a picture of such?" suggested Peter.

"Huh?"

"Take a picture with a camera controlled by the operator—you know, temporal treat the camera, film, and all but the range finder and the shutter release."

"Look, fellow, that would take a picture of the accident as it happens, all right. It's also done. Makes excellent records. But as for pre-accident stuff, know what happens?"

"No, of course not."

"Well," smiled Ben, "you'll see. Anyway, the camera comes roaring out, is poised in midair, and is snapped. The timing isn't too good, however. Well, you'll see the camera come out and snap around the place when the accident happens. Remember this is not time travel, and you can't go forward and take a picture and then come back."

"For what good it does, we can tell about when a piece of goods will move by leaning a long-time mislink against it and waiting for it to fall."

"Does electricity cross the gap?"

"Nope. Only force and motion. The television idea isn't good either, young man."

"Um, how did you know?" asked Peter.

"We go through this regular. You're not the first that has been trying to avert accidents."

"You understand that I represent I.I.I.?"

"Yes," said Simpkins. "As such, it is your responsibility to do as much as possible to save your company money. That is your job."

"Right. I still say that there is some means of averting the accident, somehow."

"Well, Ben, we've always claimed that we'd tried everything. But they didn't try the electric light until Edison got the idea, and the airplane was a new science when they went to work on it. Young man," said Simpkins, to Peter Wright, "you are a young man with a bright mind for legal intricacies. It usually makes little difference so long as the mind is capable of handling the intricacies, just what the mind was specialized in. You are a fresh mind and we've all seen fresh minds enter and lick a problem that stuck the original men for months. You think you can lick it?"

"I don't know. It just seems to me that there must be some way."



"Don't forget," said Ben, "that this is not much different from a regular problem. In construction, I mean. We have accidents where a man is hit by a flying grab hook that is not in any way temporal treated. Common accidents. The real problem, Peter, is to stop accidents. Not to try to avert them after they have happened."

"But this one—"

"So far as the temporal treatment goes, is—or has happened."

"Could you temporal treat the stuff so the mislinks pass through first?"

"Sure," laughed Ben. "Not practical. They have no forewarning then. They just go where the tools will go when used. We can't tell when one of the men will try to grind a mislink chisel. As it is, we can clear the area where the tools have been."

"Just remember that this is fact: For a one-hour mislink, we treat the tools for one hour. They are then ready for use for one hour. At the end of that time, the mislinks start to follow, and follow for one hour, at which time the temporal difference decreases on a fourth power curve, and the mislink catches up with the tool and falls back into place."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'm new at it, gentlemen, but it is my guess that this accident you anticipate need not happen."

"You forget," corrected Ben. "It's happened."

"Then where's the body?" demanded Peter Wright.

"It ... ah—"

"Has it really happened?"

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