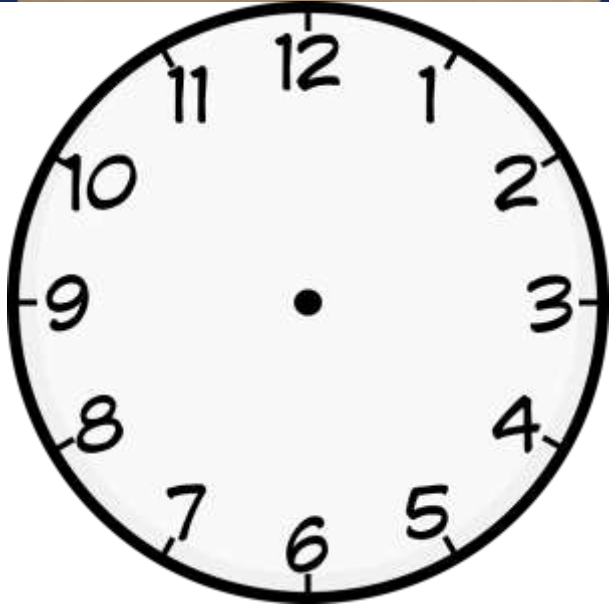


Mr. Townsend's Chronometer



A Short Science-Fiction Sea Story
D. Andrew McChesney

This year, instead of sending cards or creating a family newsletter, I thought I would share a short story I wrote a year or so ago. It begins a decade or so after the events depicted in the first two Stone Island Sea Stories. I hope you enjoy it.

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Happy Holidays... whichever you may be celebrating!

This is a work of fiction. Events and characters described herein are imaginary and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons.

William Townsend watched nervously as the Admiral's barge came alongside. He had known Edward Pierce since their days aboard HMS *Theadora* as they blockaded the French coast. He had been a midshipman then, and Pierce the frigate's third lieutenant. Still, an unexpected visit from one's superior before sailing was nerve wracking. Presumably the visit would be short. The tide would turn soon and the opportunity to depart would be lost. Townsend gave a last minute glance to ensure side boys, marines, and bo'sun's mates were in position.

The barge hooked on at the entry port, and Pierce's cocked hat appeared at deck level. Pipes squealed, side boys saluted and marines stamped muskets to the deck. Townsend doffed his hat, and Pierce returned the salute. "Welcome aboard, sir!"

"Thank you, William. My visit is more of a personal nature, so do not imagine I am here to cast a critical eye on your departure."

"Yes, sir?"

"If you have a moment, we might go below."

"Certainly, sir." Townsend nodded at Everett the first lieutenant to carry on as he and Pierce made their way below decks. "Pardon the disorder," he said as the two entered the great cabin. "With getting

underway, putting things to rights has been a low priority."

"I quite understand. And you are anchored so there is no chance you will sail with the gangway still lashed tightly to the entry port." The corners of Pierce's mouth twitched into a momentary, almost imperceptible smile.

"I'd hoped that you had forgotten that. It was some time ago."

"A memory that persists, but only as such. It is nothing I hold against you." Pierce took the package he'd carried aboard and set it carefully on the table. "And now, the reason for my unscheduled and last minute visit."

"Yes, sir?"

Unwrapping the packet, Pierce said. "It's a chronometer, Commander Townsend. I know you have two aboard, and I don't expect you will need to use it. Mr. Smythe found it in a shop just off the waterfront and is sending it to an old friend in England... something of a memento from *Vespica* and this world."

Townsend looked closely at the timepiece. "I wouldn't use it at all, sir. Even now it is not set either to Greenwich or Ipswich times."

"True enough, William." Pierce took a seat. "Mr. Smythe found it in a shop ran by a most unusual little man who claims the device is ancient, one of only two left from centuries ago. Yet accurate chronometers were not developed in our world until mere decades ago, and I hear, the same is true in this world. Yet this is claimed to keep very close time, the problem being there is no way to set it. One must account for the constant error between it and whichever prime meridian you choose for navigation."

"A simple process, to be sure. It would vex the young gentlemen should they be required that extra step to work the ship's position."

"Mr. Smythe did suggest that if you were willing, you could compare it with the chronometers currently on board. By the time you reach England you should know just how well it does or doesn't do."

"Aye, sir." Townsend carefully picked up the item in question and looked at it closely. "There's something engraved on it, but damned if I can make it out."

"No one seems to know what it says, if it says anything at all." Pierce stood and edged toward the door. "I will take my leave now and let you get underway. Have a safe voyage, Commander Townsend." He reached to shake Townsend's hand.

"Thank you, sir. With a bit of luck we'll be back in two, perhaps three years' time."

Island Enterprise brought her starboard bower aboard, catted it and began to move to the wind pressing against the backed main topsail as Pierce was piped over the side. "Helm alee!" shouted Townsend. "Hands to the braces! Set jib, main, and fore sails!" Her sternward motion ceased and she heeled slightly as the wind caught the newly set sails and sent the schooner on her way.

That evening after dinner, as the schooner's officers enjoyed a glass or two of Port, Townsend showed them the chronometer. "A curiosity at most, I would think," he said. "But this should remind us our navigational efforts need to be extremely accurate. We must cross the points of exchange on the money, so to speak, do we truly desire to reach the other world and England. No one has yet determined what the margin of error is, or what happens if we exceed it."

"Aye, sir," said Everett, who was echoed by the others.

"I propose we use all three time pieces. I and two of the young gentlemen will use one, Mr. Everett and the remaining midshipmen can use the second. Mr. Haight and his mates can use the third. Each week, we'll rotate and by the end of the voyage, all will have experience with each."

A week later, as the last day of June 1816 slipped into the past, OGS *Island Enterprise* sailed on a port tack, the wind just forward of her beam, seeking the first of five points she would need to cross to return to

the world of England, Europe, and the shipyard on the Isle of Wight where she had been built. With the exception of Sailing Master John Haight, who had the deck, all officers, including Commanding Master William Townsend appeared on deck with their sextants, hoping to get a noon sighting through the partly cloudy sky. An icy wind blew across the deck. Midshipman Theodore Culver tucked his sextant under his arm and rubbed his fingers together, trying to bring some warmth back into them.

A larger patch of blue appeared, luckily where the sun was. With results of the sun's highest angle above the horizon recorded, each of the three groups sent one person below to ascertain the time on the particular time piece they were using. Culver, assigned to Lieutenant Everett's team went below, thankful to be out of the biting air. Entering the cabin, he gently took the chronometer that had equipped the schooner since leaving England ten years before from its case. He read and carefully recorded the time and reached to put the precision instrument back. At that instant a large wave impacted the schooner's port bow. The vessel staggered and a gust of wind popped the sails like a cannon shot. Startled, Culver's semi-numb fingers lost their grip. The chronometer, the one set to Greenwich Time, dropped to the deck.

For a moment, he stood there, his mind as numb as his hands. He recovered quickly and went on deck where he approached the first lieutenant. "Here sir, the time from the Greenwich chronometer. And I have to report that it has been broken, sir."

Later Townsend looked up from the table, gazing at a stricken and scared midshipman. "Well, Mr. Culver, I could beat you within an inch of your life, but I would still not have our oldest and most reliable time piece back. You would have a bloody backside and a loss of dignity. I imagine your dignity is all but sunk for now, so we will say nothing more about it."

"Aye, sir! Thank you, sir!"

"It shall be your duty, however, to see to the care and preservation of the remaining two time pieces. Until I relieve you of the responsibility, you will keep both well wound and safe at all times."

"Aye aye, sir!"

Three days later as the schooner approached the first of the five points they needed to cross in order to reach the other world; Townsend mustered and addressed all hands. "It has been some time since any of us have gone through this. Remember, no harm has ever befallen anyone. For those of you native to this world, those of *Vespica* or *Baltica*, you can expect a variety of sensations as we cross each point. You may envision the vessel floating amongst the stars. You might sense we are both becalmed and in a gale. Others experience a feeling of timelessness, or witness the compass needle spinning madly, even though we maintain a steady course. Keep your wits about you and all will be well. The effects only last a short while."

They crossed the first point in their journey to England, early the next day, during the mid-watch. Townsend's personal sensations did not match those he had experienced on earlier crossings, and they lasted much longer. Wounds suffered battling a French privateer years ago ached as if he had suffered them within the past month. Haight, who had been a ship's boy on earlier crossings made by *Island Expedition*, mentioned that he still felt the schooner to be becalmed although he could see that she eased along nicely.

Despite his discomfort, Townsend remembered that going through one of these points often reset the ship's longitude and it would be possible to effectively move much farther from one noon sighting to the next than could be achieved under sail alone. Because of that effect, the sun was up, even in the early hours of the morning watch, and this during the southern hemisphere's winter when daylight was not be expected until near its end.

On deck, he approached the first lieutenant. "Mr. Everett, I've

explained the jumps in longitude that often accompany these passages, have I not?"

"Indeed, sir, you have."

"In that case, I'm sure you've noticed that the sun is quite high in the sky for the time of day we believe it to be. We should be prepared to take noon sightings... well, somewhat before noon."

"Even as we enter the forenoon watch, sir?"

"Indeed! The first time *Island Expedition* crossed we didn't observe noon the next day until well after four bells in the afternoon watch. Despite the desire to believe the position we will soon find to be at fault, it will be our position and we can navigate to the second point from there."

"Aye, sir," said Everett. "How long did you say these strange feelings should last? I still envision we sail amongst the stars."

"I've never known them to last this long, but I too am experiencing a similar situation."

The day after passing over the first point, and with a new navigational base established, a more normal routine was found amongst the crew of Our Good Ship *Island Enterprise*. Briefed by Townsend, officers scarcely flinched when efforts to plot their current position often showed them to be sailing across dry land, whether on charts of the world where they had been for the past ten years, or the world that was home for many of them.

A few days later, as the call "Up Spirits" was sounded, the masthead lookout hallooed the quarterdeck. "Sail ho! Off the port beam! She's on fire!"

"What course?"

"The same, sir! Or converging!"

"Thank you. Keep an eye on her!"

"Mr. Everett, all hands 'bout ship! We'll run down and see if we can be of assistance."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"First time we've ever sighted another vessel while between any of the five, sir," mentioned Haight.

"Yes, but we cannot allow a distressed vessel to go unaided, regardless."

"Aye, sir."

The schooner altered course and when it appeared she was not gaining on the burning ship, Townsend ordered more sail set.

"She's hull up, sir! We're gaining!" The lookout reported.

"Thank you, Jenkins!"

"Don't see no flames, sir. Just a lot a smoke. Appears to be amidships, sir!"

"A whaler?" asked Culver, midshipman of the watch. "Try works going?"

"Possibly, but she would be hove to for that, and yonder vessel is reeling off nearly as good a speed as we are."

"Near to ten knots at the last cast, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Culver. Now run below and fetch my best glass." Townsend thought to send the midshipman aloft to report but decided to go himself. Things were not adding up and he wanted a first-hand look at the endangered vessel.

Minutes later, perched on the main topmast crosstrees, Townsend waited for his breath to calm. He timed the motion of the rigging and fell into sync with it. Unaware of the movements used to keep his sight steady, Townsend focused on the vessel. Smoke belched fiercely from what looked like a gigantic galley smoke stack, located midway between the fore and main masts. He saw no evidence of panic or distress about the deck, while white water frothed from strange structures along the vessel's sides. Her sails filled well, but for the amount set, he could not believe such a turn of speed. As he watched the strange ship began to fade from sight.

"It was like she sailed into a fog bank," he told the first lieutenant and others on the quarterdeck when he descended some moments later.

"I don't think she was in distress at all. Possibly we've seen our first steamship. That would account for the apparently contained fire and the turbulence at her sides. Paddlewheels, I believe, gentlemen."

Island Enterprise passed over the second point without incident a few days later. Once again sensations experienced lingered much longer than was thought normal. When noon sightings were taken the next day, Midshipman Culver discovered that the second chronometer, the one set to Ipswich time, the Prime Meridian that passed through Kentland, had simply stopped. When held aloft at different angles or gently shaken, something could be heard tumbling about within the case. Petrified he reported the situation.

"You have an unlucky way with these things, Mr. Culver," said Townsend. "I'm sure it is simply fate that causes this malfunction, but to be sure I will assume care of the remaining unit."

"Aye aye, sir."

Island Enterprise steered for the third point, the supposedly ancient chronometer now the only means of determining longitude. A day before crossing that location another vessel was sighted. This vessel had all sails furled and yet moved along smartly, smoke billowing from two tall pipes. There were no odd structures along her sides, no paddlewheels, but the water under her stern churned. As had the earlier ship, this one appeared suddenly, almost as if out of nothing, and after being observed from deck for several minutes, faded from sight.

Prior to the loss of the two more recently made time pieces, the third had proven to be equally accurate at keeping time, once its preset error was accounted for. Townsend took personal charge of it, something that he sometimes thought he should have done with all three.

Crossing the third point proved to be more harrowing than those earlier on this voyage or on earlier journeys. Several hands reported

being able to momentarily see through the solid structure of the hull, and others reported nothing but a black void, no water, no sky, no stars, to be seen. Townsend not only felt the ache of his wounds, but like Everett now and Hotchkiss many years ago, experienced the schooner sailing amongst the stars. When the fourth location was bisected, conditions were even more chaotic. This time Townsend also had the feeling of timelessness that Pierce and others had experienced during the earlier voyages. Nearly all hands experienced multiple strange happenings. As was becoming common on this voyage, the effects lingered well into the next day.

The jumps in longitude following each crossing grew larger as well, with all of them being greater than experienced before. After passing through the fourth point, calculations placed the schooner in what would be the South Atlantic Ocean. On deck, Townsend watched the crew as they went about the daily routine. He sensed their uneasiness, and in fact, felt it himself. With one more location to cross, would the schooner's crew hold together? Would their sanity hold? As nerve wracking as it was, logic told him that it was all illusion and that no harm would come to them. Still, when Lieutenant Everett came on deck, Townsend entered in to quiet conversation with him.

"Hands are restless, Mr. Everett."

"Aye. I daresay I am as well. What we are experiencing is not what I was lead to believe would happen during this portion of the voyage."

"No it is not."

"Deck there! Something to port!"

With the hail from the masthead, all eyes turned to see just what it was. Low on the horizon a vessel of some kind moved with great rapidity through the sea. "Another steamer, to be sure," offered Everett, noting the vessel carried only rudimentary masts and had no sails set at all. Rather than the smoothly arched sheer all were used to, the strange

ship's upper profile was jagged with what appeared to be deck houses and other structures. Protruding at low angles were what appeared to be short stout spars. As they watched, flame and smoke billowed from the forward most of these.

"Damn!" said Townsend. "Those are her guns. What would she be firing at?" Strangely, no report of gun fire reached their ears. "Masthead there! Can you see an adversary?"

"Nothing in sight, sir!"

"Very odd, sir," Observed the first lieutenant. "We see, but it is if we are not here... or that they are not there."

"Flashes on the horizon!" came the hail from aloft. "Just off the port bow!"

"Noted!" replied Townsend. Within moments the water around the strange vessel erupted in a series of explosions. Water spouted high into the air, some of it coming down to wet the distant vessel. "Shell, not shot, it would appear, and at such a range."

"She's fading away, sir, just like before." Within minutes of that observation by Lieutenant Everett, the horizon was once again clear. *Island Enterprise* sailed on, the center of her own world, and for all she knew the only vessel within it.

That night as they watched, all hands so nervous no one wanted to turn in, a lone vessel, long and black, with rows of lights along her sides and four tall chimneys billowing smoke, graze a floating mountain of ice. The ship slowed, became still and began to settle at the head. In horror they watched the boats launch from the stricken ship as her bows dipped closer to the sea and her stern rose higher and higher. At the next instant, the sinking vessel, the boats, and the iceberg were gone.

"Mr. Everett, we might make tomorrow make and mend, give the hands a chance to stand down and collect themselves. An extra ration of grog might serve as well. We still have our final location to cross."

"Aye, sir!"

Not two hours later the lookout again reported a vessel on the horizon. This one had an obvious fo'c'sle and poop deck, but with a deckhouse amidships. A single pipe, discharging thin smoke rose from atop the deckhouse. As the crew of the *Island Enterprise* watched this latest sighting, it suddenly rose from the water. A giant geyser of water engulfed it, lifting the midsection higher and snapping the hull in two. Flames and smoke from the blast boiled skyward.

"That's the problem with steamships," remarked Haight, now on deck. "It's not safe to keep such a fire going all the time."

"Closer to the schooner, the sea boiled, air cascaded up in a mass of bubbles, and a long low dark hull rose from the depths. A small deckhouse sat amidships along an otherwise clean upper deck. What might have been guns were all that disrupted the clean sweep of deck, fore and aft of the structure. Hands aboard the schooner saw several men clamber out of the deck house and take up stations on deck and the structure itself. Water bubbled at the stern of this strange craft and it moved at increasing speed towards the location of the recently exploded vessel.

Aboard *Island Enterprise* they watched in awe as the odd craft maneuvered amongst the floating wreckage. At one point it stopped to pick up a survivor, and from time to time they took selected bits of the destroyed vessel on board. Then with quiet efficiency, those topside disappeared back inside the hull and the entire vessel sunk from sight.

"No, Mr. Haight, I don't think the fire destroyed yonder vessel," remarked Townsend. "It was that thing... that submersible!"

"Hardly sporting, is it, sir."

"No, I suppose not. It does make me wonder what we shall find next."

"Indeed," said Everett. "Just where are we, and what is it we are seeing?"

"I'm not sure," said Townsend. "We cross our final point in two

days' time, and we should then be shut of this strangeness".

"I hope so!"

The next day as the schooner moved easily through the water, her hands in a state of tension-filled relaxation, officers met on deck to take the noon sighting. The sky was clear allowing for easy sighting of the sun. Angles were determined and calculations made to establish their position. Noon was declared and hands piped to dinner. No sooner had the mess cooks reported to the galley to collect their mates' rations than the lookout announced more vessels in sight. This time they completely encircled the schooner, some fairly close and others at a distance. Most were warships of some kind, all of them much larger than *Island Enterprise*, and in fact, much larger than the huge first rates many had once served in. Dinner was all but forgotten as everyone watched with dreaded anticipation. As before, flame and smoke burst from these vessels, and Townsend observed that these guns appeared to be in rotating deckhouses. At one point he was able to see two small dots arcing their way into the sky, enroute to a far distant target. This time he saw the distant flashes as the shells plunged home, and the muzzle flashes of a distant fleet firing in return. Strangely silent, the shells fired in their direction fell amongst the warships surrounding them, exploding with great ferocity. One struck the nearest vessel, knocking her upper works into a tangled mass. A larger but still silent explosion followed and a cloud of steam escaped.

Amazingly none of the shells fired from the ships now just visible on the horizon struck *Island Enterprise*, although a number plunged into the sea and detonated at close distance. The water thrown up by the underwater blasts never fell on the schooner's deck.

"Starboard quarter! She's heading for us!" The lookout cried in panic. That huge vessel, smoke pouring out of her two tall stacks, left a curved wake of frothy water as she picked up speed and changed course in an attempt to evade the next salvo. Looking quickly about, Townsend

watched the vessels surrounding them changing course in what appeared to be chaotic fashion.

"Hands to the braces! Back the topsails!" He shouted. "Helm alee!" Hand jumped to obey, knocking mess kits to the deck, their dinners forgotten in watching the strange scene about them and now fearing they would be run down and their vessel crushed. Having been on make and mend as well as at their dinner, their reaction time wasn't what it should have been.

Townsend and all hands watched apprehensively as the huge vessel sped towards them. The yards came round and the wind pressed the huge topsails against the masts, slowing the schooner. The rudder bit, swinging the bows into the wind and further slackening her speed.

"Oh God!" screamed a crewman hauling on the main topsail topping lift. "We're in for it! We ain't gonna make it!"

Townsend stared for a moment, realizing the crewman was correct. A million and seven thoughts raced through his mind as the sharp bow, obviously of iron or steel when observed from this distance, loomed over the insignificant wooden schooner. Just before the expected impact, Townsend noted the colors flying from the rudimentary mast. Damn, he thought, she's English!

In the next instant the imposing vessel wasn't there. *Island Enterprise* lost steerageway, wallowed in the swell and began to move astern. Looking about, Townsend and the others onboard watched the surrounding fleet fade from sight, blinking out in the same way stars fade with the coming of the sun.

Haight gathered his wits first. "Hands to the braces!" he bawled. "Helm aweather!" Slowly the crew responded. Townsend saw the slowness, a fault that he would normally upset him to no end, and yet he didn't have it within him to have issued those first orders. At last yards were braced around so the wind again filled the sails. The rudder went over and within a few moments the schooner was back on course.

"Thank you, Mr. Haight!" said Townsend quietly. "I suggest we heave to, remain as we are for the day. We all need a spell after that."

"Aye aye, sir."

Mr. Everett, you may pipe 'up spirits' if you will."

After a sleepless night, Townsend ordered sail set again, setting more than he normally would have, hoping to get to across the final, fifth point of their journey as soon as possible. That day brought more sightings of strange and fantastic vessels. Huge ships armed with a relative few giant guns in rotating deck houses sped by. Others, merchantmen as far as anyone could guess, passed silently by, generally at a more sedate pace. Portions of battles fought were seen, although a strange quiet prevailed. Those on board the schooner never heard the sound of gunfire or any noise at all from the mechanical birds that alighted upon and left regularly from the huge ships with the flat upper decks and small deckhouses set along one side.

As time to cross the final location drew near, Townsend felt a growing fear within and continued to sense from the others on board. A few hours before it appeared they would cross the final point, he called for all hands. "Listen lads! I'm not sure what has been happening. Those who have made this journey before know it has never been like this. I too dread crossing the final spot, but we have to if we want to reach a world we know. Else, we are likely to sail these waters forever, while our stores spoil and our water runs out. While we've seen ships, strange ships on this passage, we have not seen land of any kind. We have never seen land during these journeys, and it may be that none exists here. Let us all take a deep breath, offer whatever prayers or devotions you find appropriate, and tomorrow should find us in a place we are familiar with."

Crossing the fifth point proved to be anti-climatic. Hands experienced the more usual single sensation, although Townsend old wounds ached momentarily, rather than revisiting the events he remembered from his earlier journeys. Noon the next day was not far off

from when it should have been, and the plot worked out to a point they could have reached from their location the previous day.

"Do we run in to St. Helena, sir" asked Lieutenant Everett as he and Midshipman Culver joined Townsend for dinner.

"Our stores are good, are they not?" said Townsend in response.

"We are still well-stocked, sir."

"Then I see no reason to delay our return to England, Mr. Everett. "We will crack on with the changing of the watch. Quarters this evening with drill at the great guns. We cannot be sure if we are not still at war with the French. And we might have Royal Navy colors hoisted as well."

"Aye aye, sir." Everett stood. "If you will excuse me, sir, I'll see to it. "What about our current colors, sir? The Stone Island Naval Ensign, the Vespican flag?"

"I believe it may remain. It is close to the British Island Expedition Organization flag; the one we sailed under, back in '06."

"On the flight deck! Time to get in proper flight deck gear! Helmets on and goggles down! Check chocks, chains, and tie-downs! Check for FOD! Start 'em up!" The Air Boss's voice boomed from the 5MC on USS *George H. W. Bush*. Crewmen in a rainbow of colors moved about the deck, preparing to launch the first sorties of the day. Power cables were connected, fueling hoses stowed, and tow tractors mounting air-start units or *huffers* positioned at the aircraft slated for this first event. Flight personnel came on deck from the catwalks and approached their assigned aircraft. Plane captains saluted and the Naval Aviators and Naval Flight Officers began a thorough walk-around.

Captain Ray Saldivar watched the activity from the bridge. After two weeks of flight operations, things were going well. Hitches experienced at the beginning of the current at-sea period were behind them, and the deck functioned smoothly. He rarely intervened in daily flight operations, knowing the Air Department and Air Wing were

competent and well trained. Still, having ultimate responsibility, he kept a close watch on everything.

Two helicopters lifted off from the angle deck and disappeared into the haze. One would remain nearby as a plane guard, ready to pluck downed crewmen from the water if an aircraft crashed into the sea. The other would range farther out, looking for vessels getting too near the carrier and her escorts, as well as conducting anti-submarine drills.

The shrill whine of jet engines grew as those aircraft set for the first launch throttled up and moved the catapults. Blue shirted crewmen moved with them, wheel chocks in hand, ready to put under the wheels when needed. An EA-6B Prowler waited behind the Jet Blast Deflector of Cat One. The Hawkeye already there launched, steam billowing from the slot in the cat track. The shuttle hit the end with a thump felt throughout the ship. The Prowler taxied over the lowered JBD and dropped its launch bar to engage the shuttle. Green shirted catapult crewmen darted under the aircraft to install the holdback assembly. The pilot advanced the throttles to full power, checked for full movement of all flight controls, and saluted the catapult officer. The *shooter* flung his arm forward. A second later, as steam pressure built up in the catapult's twin cylinders, the holdback snapped, and the aircraft accelerated along the deck. Airborne, the pilot retracted the landing gear, and the EA-6B turned gently away and began a slow climb.

Five minutes later, the phone at the captain's bridge chair jangled into life. "Captain speaking," said Saldivar."

"CVIC, Captain. We have an unidentified surface contact, dead ahead, just over the horizon."

"On radar?"

"No sir. Indian Gal Six One Two spotted it. Garuda Five Zero Seven has seen it as well."

"Well what the hell is it? Have we made contact?"

After the slightest of pauses, the voice on the phone said, "It's a

sailing vessel of some kind! They nearly panic every time Indian Gal approaches, and they don't respond to any radio calls. On our current course we risk running them down."

"Hold one."

"Hold aye."

Saldivar's brain worked feverishly. The launch was in full effect, one aircraft after another lining up and shooting off the deck. Based on the ships speed, the time required to complete the launch and the estimated location of the surface contact, they would not be finished before the possibility of a collision. "Suspend the launch!" he ordered. An F/A-18D Hornet, already in tension, shot along the waist cat and into the air. Aircraft taxied to parking spots, were chocked, tied-down, and engines shut off.

Rear Admiral Ulrich, Carrier Group Commander stormed into the Captain's bridge. After impatiently listening to the Captain's explanation, he sighed and said. "The Brits are closest, so have HMS *Diamond* take a look. Tell them to send a boarding party if needed, but find out why that vessel is there!"

"Hold fast, men! Hold fast!" Townsend yelled. They were at a near panic, and to tell the truth, he was not far behind. Just as they had set the forenoon watch, a distant roar was heard, and moments later a huge flying ... thing approached, seemingly suspended under a vibrating, shimmering disc. It darted about, sometimes near the water; other times a mere speck in the air. It came close enough that Townsend and others could see lettering and other markings on it. Gray on gray, the lettering was hard to distinguish and they were unable to make it out. Another airborne vessel approached at terrific speed and roared by, just over the mastheads. The sound it produced was akin to one long drawn out broadside from a first rate ship-of-the-line. It circled in the distance.

The first machine closed in, feet above the water, the surface

rippling from the wind it generated. A powerful echoing voice issued from it. "This is a restricted area. Steer Zero Four Five to avoid possible collision!" Townsend shouted to give orders above the noise. His crew eventually heard, set more sail and swung to bows around to the Northeast. The flying machine kept pace with the schooner, although it backed off to a less menacing distance.

Midshipman Culver grabbed Townsend's arm and pointed. To starboard a ship emerged from the haze. What looked for all the world like an elongated pyramid towered above her deck. She closed rapidly, and as she did so the flying craft backed farther off, allowing those on *Island Enterprise* to once again hear themselves. Another unnaturally loud voice boomed over the sea. "Heave to and prepare to be boarded!"

"Do we repel boarders, sir?" asked Everett.

"From what we've seen, I believe it would do us no good."

As the boarding party approached, Townsend and the others aboard the schooner looked on in awe. Like its parent vessel, the small boat was propelled by mechanical means. No one rowed and it closed at a speed higher than even the best oarsmen could obtain. As it neared, Haight noticed something. "By God, sir, they're English! They fly the White Ensign!"

Six months later, at his home in New Harbor, Stone Island, Bill Culver sat at the kitchen table, enjoying his morning coffee and reading the morning paper. "Well I'll be damned!" he said, half to himself. "Martha! Come look at this!"

"What is it, Bill?" She dried her hands on her apron and stepped away from the sink.

"I've told you about my umpteenth great uncle Theodore, haven't I?"

"Oh yes. Several times. Ain't he the one who sailed with Townsend on *Island Enterprise*."

"Yeah. Everyone always thought they disappeared while in route, but this article says they arrived in England earlier this year."

"Bill, that's impossible. They left 200 years ago. It can't be."

"I know, but according to this, they just popped up in a British and American naval exercise. Caused a stir, showing up where no one was supposed to be. Said they'd been at sea for only five months... a record time between worlds, between Stone Island and Great Britain for those days. Entire crew is alive and well."

"Wouldn't it be something to meet an ancestor face to face? I mean, are they going to be able to come home?"

"Paper says the authorities are still investigating and haven't yet decided final disposition of the crew. I'm happy for them, I suppose, but don't know if I'd want to meet him or any of them. It just doesn't seem right."

"Bill, anything about how it might have happened?"

"Not really, except that upon arrival they were navigating with a chronometer of unknown origin, their other two having broken or stopped working."

"I see."

A year later at a research facility operated by the British Island Expedition Organization, somewhere in Great Britain, two researchers took a break. One asked the other: "Any headway with the Townsend clock, Marc?"

"We've finally translated the inscription, thanks to Verna Morgan, an archeologist doing a dig on Stone Island. She'd found inscriptions similar to what is on the timepiece, and I combined the two sets to get a larger sample. That was enough to allow the linguistics computer to arrive at a tentative translation."

"Well?"

"I think it's graffiti, something added, but something very much

in tune with its possible function."

"Well?" This time Earl's voice betrayed a bit of impatience.

"It was a rhyme, I think, but the closest we can come is, 'I'll take you forward, my brother will take you back! How far you'll never know, if our parent you lack!'"

"Cryptic!"

"Yeah. And I still can't open or access the internals in any way. Laser scans or illumination with infra-red reveals other writing, but it is too faint to read."

"I know it isn't proper, but I could take a look at it?"

"I don't see why not, Earl. Come by my lab, later today."

A couple of hours later, Earl buzzed for entrance at Marc's laboratory. Marc keyed in the unlock code, the door slid open and Earl stepped in. "I hope you are not too busy."

"No, your timing is perfect." He led the way further into the facility. Reaching a work bench he picked up what looked to be a larger than normal pocket watch and handed it to Earl.

Earl gazed at it, gently hefted it, feeling the weight of the device in his hand. "I've seen this before," he said.

"But when? How? It's been in here since it arrived and you have never been here before now?"

"I know, but it is something I've seen... or similar to something I've seen."

"I don't doubt you. It's just..."

"Ah yes," said Earl with his eyes widening in remembrance. "They had it in a little museum, or one of those roadside exhibitions, somewhere in the North. You know the sort of place, one filled with all sorts of arcane curiosities, bizarre objects, and the like?"

"Mermaid mummies or the pickled brains of long dead villains?"

"Exactly!"

"I'm guessing it's a coincidence, but do you remember anything

about it?"

Earl set the timepiece down gently and paced a bit. "I still don't remember where it was. Susan and I were on holiday and stopped for a bit, just to get out of the car. I seem to remember it was labelled as the Devil's Clock."

"An ominous title, perhaps," said Marc.

"Something about it being from the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Supposedly a strange vessel had sailed into the harbor, full of fire, no sails set, and yet coursing along with great speed. Folks aboard talked about being from another world and were strangely dressed. The colonists thought them in league with Satan himself. They tried, convicted, and burnt or hanged them all as witches, long before the famous Salem Trials."

"I've never heard of any earlier trials," said Marc. "Still..." He sat down at a nearby desk top computer, logged in and began a web search. "Convenient that our system connects to the internet on the other world."

"Yes, but what..."

"I have an idea I want to check out."

"Which is?"

"The fact that Townsend sailed from Stone Island and never reached England has been well known for the past two centuries. What if another voyager set out and never made it?"

"Hmmm?"

"What if he had the other chronometer, the *brother*, and went back in time, rather than advancing into the future?"

"But why wouldn't we know about it, here? Townsend's disappearance was well known."

"Ah, here's something," Mark announced. "1852, Sean Arthur, grandson of ship-designer and builder Sir Ronald Author set out on a private voyage to this world and the United States. He was an early Vespican entrepreneur. It was to be a honeymoon, a gift for his new bride. He'd designed and built a small steamer yacht, and had hired a crew to man it. Nothing about him having an unusual time piece aboard, but he did have a collection of unusual items to pass along to a friend in the States."

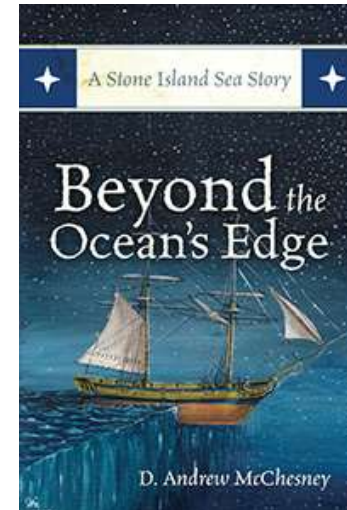
"Since his was a private venture, there wasn't a big stir when he never arrived. But how do the damned things work? Why aren't we suddenly two hundred or two thousand years in the future? You've worked with that thing for the past year and it just sits there like a mysterious paper weight."

"I'm guessing it has to do with the *parent*. The *brothers* might simply be controls for the actual device. One would have to have it in order to travel in time."

"But Townsend and his crew did? Apparently so did this Arthur fellow?"

"That puzzles me as well, unless it only occurs when one crosses from one world to the other. Perhaps the timepieces themselves are enough to trigger something in the temporal patterns that only exist there."

"Perhaps?"



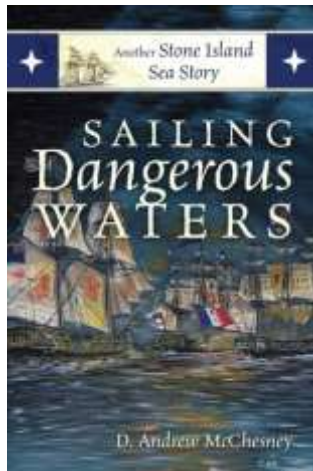
The closest this story comes to reality is that VAQ-134, the Garudas, recently made the U. S. Navy's last EA-6B Prowler deployment aboard USS George H. W. Bush (CV-77). The author served in VAQ-134 during its initial (the Navy's third) Prowler deployment aboard USS Constellation (CV-64). In addition, HMS Diamond is a state of the art Royal Navy Air Defense Destroyer.

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A quick sketch, done several years ago, depicting HMS/OGS Island Expedition. With the exception of an additional gun port per side, OGS Island Enterprise would appear much the same.