A Loint of Paw

By Isaac Asimov

There was no question that Montie Stein had, through clever fraud, stolen better than $100,000. There was also no question that he was apprehended one day after the statute of limitations had expired.

It was his manner of avoiding arrest during that interval that brought on the epoch-making case of the *State of New York* v. *Montgomery Harlow Stein,* with all its consequences. It introduced law to the fourth dimension.

For, you see, after having committed the fraud and possessed himself of the hundred grand plus, Stein had calmly entered a time machine, of which he was in illegal possession, and set the controls for seven years and one day in the future.

Stein's lawyers put it simply. Hiding in time was not fundamentally different from hiding in space. If the forces of law had not uncovered Stein in the seven-year interval, that was their hard luck.

The district attorney pointed out that the statute of limitations was not intended to be a game between the law and the criminal. It was a merciful measure designed to protect a culprit from indefinitely prolonged fear of arrest. For certain crimes, a defined period of apprehension of apprehension—so to speak—was considered punishment enough. But Stein, the D.A. insisted, had not experienced any period of apprehension at all.

Stein's lawyer remained unmoved. The law said nothing about measuring the extent of a culprit's fear and anguish. It simply set a time limit.

The D.A. said that Stein had not lived through the limit.

Defense said that Stein was seven years older now than at the time of the crime and had therefore lived through the limit.

The D.A. challenged the statement, and the defense produced Stein's birth certificate. He was born in 2973. At the time of the crime, 3004, he was thirty-one. Now, in 3011, he was thirty-eight.

The D.A. shouted that Stein was not physiologically thirty-eight, but thirty-one.

Defense pointed out freezingly that the law, once the individual was granted to be mentally competent, recognized solely chronological age, which could be obtained only by subtracting the date of birth from the date of now.

The D.A., growing impassioned, swore that if Stein were allowed to go free, half the laws on the books would be useless.

Then change the laws, said the defense, to take time travel into account; but until the laws are changed, let them be enforced as written.

Judge Neville Preston took a week to consider and then handed down his decision. It was a turning point in the history of law. It was almost a pity, then, that some people suspect Judge Preston to have been swayed in his way of thinking by the irresistible impulse to phrase his decision as he did.

For that decision, in full, was: "A niche in time saves Stein."

Author's note: *If you expect me to apologize for this, you little know your man. I consider a play on words the noblest form of wit, so there!*

➤ That's Too Punny

Do you remember the definition of *trope* that was given in a previous issue? If you said a trope is "a device that shifts the meaning of words," you score. Within the many categories of tropes are *puns,* plays on any two words that are similar in sound but different in meaning. In this story, Asimov employs a pun for his ending.

Puns often get a bad rap as low humor, but some of the best English writers adored using them—especially Shakespeare. In *Romeo and Juliet,* for instance, Romeo suffers a *vile* death. Get it? The star-crossed lover drank a *vial* of poison.

There are special classifications of puns. For instance, there's something called a *paragram.* That's when the wordplay involves a switcheroo of one or more letters in a word. For an example of a paragram, look at the headline in this very box.