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**THRILLING
WONDER
STORIES**

The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction



TRAPPED in ETERNITY

A Strange Time Machine Merges Past, Present and Future into One!

By RAY CUMMINGS

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THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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I met the surgeon's gaze as he replaced the bandages on Dora's eyes.

"I'll talk to you outside, Mr. Blair," he said.

Dora's hands groped for me as I stooped over her reclining chair, her sensitive fingers—all her seventeen years of life the eyes of her blindness—caressed my face.

"I'll be back in a moment, Dora," I said. "You just lie quiet."

The surgeon faced me on the veranda outside the living room of Dora's little bungalow here in the Westchester suburbs of New York City.

"She will never see," the surgeon said. "The operation failed."

Poor little Dora. She had hoped that the science of surgery would dispel her eternal darkness.

"All right, Doctor," I said quietly. "I'll tell her."

Dora and I sat that evening in the little moonlit garden beside the house. She had removed the bandage. Slim, blond girl, having a queerly ethereal beauty as though her blindness had set her apart from this world. Blue eyes pale, seeming always questing.

My name is Alan Blair. Details of me are unimportant, save that I was twenty-four, that August, 1936. I had met Dora Kean the year before. Her aged father, a retired professor, was her only close relative. He had died suddenly, leaving her alone, with this little bungalow and a small annuity. Dora and I were engaged now; to be married within a few months.

We sat, that momentous night of August 30th, 1936, with the moonlight filtering through the trees and the world a vision of beauty around us. Dora had been brave over her disappointment. She was smiling gently now. Her hands brushed my face; her smile was quizzical. "You're very handsome, Alan. I'm a lucky girl."

I laughed. "Maybe you are, and maybe not."

Then suddenly I was gripping her, and she heard my startled gasp.

"What is it, Alan?"

"Something—over there near the house. Good Lord—"

Incredible thing. I stared. In the shadows of the garden between us and the little stucco bungalow, a shape was shimmering. Wraithlike outlines, where a moment before there had been nothing.

The ghostly outlines of a cage. A cubical thing ten feet high, fifteen feet square, set upon the ground like a lion cage painted luminous, shimmering so that for the first second or two it could have been conjured by my own startled fancy.

Then I heard a vague electrical whine. And then the materialized cage was no longer shimmering. Reality! Dark lattice of

bars. Small windows of a luminous transparency. A solid door. It had an interior light. The door slid sideward with a rasping click. The light silhouetted a figure peering out. A man. Then he stepped from the doorway.

He was hardly more than twenty feet away from us—a man as tall as myself, with a bullet head of closely clipped black hair. Queer figure indeed. Wide-shouldered fellow in a leather garment queerly shaped.

"Do not be afraid," he said, in an English queerly intoned. He took a few steps toward us; and as we leaped to our feet he stopped, and stood smiling.

"I am Sah Groat," he began. "I live here." He gestured with a thick powerful arm at our little moonlit garden. "This is my home. I have come back to visit you."

Amazing visitor! He sat presently, cross-legged on the ground beside us while we gaped at him and listened to his amazing words. Visitor from the future! Our garden—the living room of his home, six hundred years from now! This cage his vehicle with which, at will, he was traveling back and forth through the centuries!

We sat, feeling like untutored savages, while he tried to make us understand the mysteries of this science which to him was so comprehensible.

"Between the four planes of Space—length, breadth, thickness and time," he said, "there is no essential distinction. Science, ever since the days of your Albert Einstein, has recognized that Time is a property of Space. A house has length, breadth and thickness. *And duration*. Without duration, it would have no real existence."

Space-time. The blending out of which the Universe is built. And then he tried to show us how the future and the Past, co-exist with what we call the Present; the same Space-dimensions, but with the Time-dimension altered.

"I don't think I can conceive that," I said.

"No," he agreed, "because your whole conception of Time is illogical. For instance: Suppose, with your human intelligence, you were a tree, rooted here in this garden. Suppose that the normal order of things was that New York City would come slowly toward you and pass before you. Time normally does that for us. But you, if you were that tree, could you conceive going across Space and reaching New York City? Could you believe that New York City exists there now? We humans can imagine moving through Space—because we have always done it. But the tree would say, 'New York City *will be* here. It will exist.' The future! You understand? The tree would never realize the present, unperceived existence of New York City, and the possibility of swiftly going there by altering one's Space-dimensions!

"The same is true with Time. It has a normal change of dimension, so that if we do nothing to alter that dimension, we are like the tree. We think that nothing exists until Time brings it before us!"

Amazing thing, but I seemed to be grasping it. "You mean," I said, "you are able to cause an abnormal change in the Time-dimension?"

"Yes." He smiled. "We define it, altering substance by altering the rate and character of the motion that constitutes the electrical vortex we call the proton."

"That," I said, "I most positively do not understand."

"Because," he retorted, "you are not aware of what all substance really is. Matter—with its dimensions of Space-time—it is molecules, composed of atoms. But what is an atom? A ring of electrons—which are particles of negative, disembodied electricity, revolving at very high speeds around a central nucleus of positive electricity, which we call a proton. But of what substance—what character—is the proton? Why even in nineteen-twenty-three, or perhaps before that, the theory was established that the proton merely is a vortex. A whirlpool. An electrical whirlpool in Space! That robs Matter of the last vestige of substance! A thing built merely of movement!

"Everything is electrical—or akin to it. The character of everything depends upon Matter's inherent vibratory motion. Thus, to alter the Time-dimension, we alter the rate and character of that vibration—that basic vortex—the proton."

He gestured to his time-vehicle. "I can give you only fundamentals—the machine itself is not abstruse, merely mechanically intricate. Every particle of Matter in that vehicle—and my own body when I am in it—is electrical in its basic nature. The mechanism circulates a current through every particle of that Matter. An electronic current. It causes the inherent vibratory movements of the protons of Matter to change their character. The matter changes its state. It acquires a different Time-factor. A different Time-dimension. A series of different dimensions, I should say—so that the progressive changes constitute a traveling through Time. Like the tree, uprooted, changing its position in Space."

Time traveling! And here, in this same space that now held Dora's little bungalow and garden, Sah Groat's home existed in the year 2536. He was a research physicist. Suddenly I envisaged all the immensity of things and events of what we call the Past, Present and Future, that crowded our little garden! The moonlight fell upon our strange visitor as he sat cross-legged on the ground. Strange man from the future. I guessed that he might be thirty years old. Or perhaps far older. His facial skin was drawn tightly over high cheek-bones. It was a queerly luminous skin. Weird.

A different sort of human? I found myself suddenly shuddering, as though here, gazing at him, I was trying to fathom the unknown. Something about him—weird, indefinable—and frightening. His gestures were queer—all his movements abnormal to the aspect of any man I had ever seen before; and frightening, because I could not define their abnormality.

Absurd thoughts! I tried to dispel them. Then suddenly I realized that he was queerly staring at Dora as she sat tense, with her sightless eyes questing the sound of his voice.

"Your mate?" he said abruptly.

"We are going to be married soon," I answered.

Still his gaze clung to her. I stared at his eyes. They were strangely brooding. The eyes of one who has seen too much. Or was there something lacking in this weird man's eyes? Something that should be there, but was not?

"She is very strangely beautiful," he said quietly.

Did Dora have some intuition? I saw her smile abruptly fade, and over her sensitive face came a vague expression of revulsion and fear.

"I have never seen a woman's beauty like hers," Groat added. "Her eyes see nothing. You should have that fixed."

I told him how we had tried. Still his look never left Dora's face. And suddenly he said, as though abruptly he had made a decision.

"My surgeon could fix that—in a few minutes. A pre-natal optical defect—not a disease. A little mechanism of lens and nerves to be repaired." He shrugged his high wide shoulders, with a queer jerking gesture. "I will take you to my surgeon."

It made my heart leap. A surgeon of six hundred years from now, with all the skill and knowledge that the centuries had brought!

Dora gasped, "Why—oh, if you only could."

"How—how long will it take?" I murmured.

"The trip? How long? That means nothing. I can make it take what seems a few minutes of your consciousness."

A few minutes—to get to this super-surgeon! An excitement struck at me so that I lost all caution.

Groat was gesturing again. "My surgeon lives just down that little hill—he will come at once if I send for him."

I led Dora over the threshold of the little cage—a rectangular metal room glowing with soft violet light; a few strangely fashioned metal chairs; an instrument table of fragile-looking tubes, dials, levers and coils.

"Do not be afraid," Groat said softly. "Sit here by this bull's-eye—"

He seemed reluctant to tear his luminous brooding gaze from Dora. Then he sat at the instrument table. I saw a long row of time-dials marking the centuries, the years, months and days. In the silence the small lever clicked as he shoved it. There was a low hum. The dark bars of the cage abruptly glowed luminous—a pallid glow that suffused all the cage, bathed us in its electric light.

I felt my senses reel as we swept off into Time. But within an instant my senses steadied. The pallid light in the cage was soft but so strangely intense that I could fancy it was penetrating every atom of my body, every tiny cell within me vibrating from its touch. It connected the mesh of the cage bars so that we seemed in a luminous room of translucent walls.

But the one bull's-eye beside us remained transparent. Amazing sight! I saw the moon and all the stars swinging from the zenith to the horizon. The sun of Tomorrow rose and plunged in a swift arc; the day was gone.

Accelerated motion. Night and day now were so swiftly succeeding each other that they blended into a luminous grey monochrome of twilight. Then in another moment the four seasons themselves were blended. Silent, dead-looking monochrome landscape, queerly lacking in detail so that as I gazed at any one spot only grey blurred blankness seemed there.

"Oh Alan—tell me about it! You forget that I cannot see."

I tried to describe it.

"What a pity—a girl so beautiful," I heard Groat say, "always in darkness. You will see presently, my dear."

The indicators of the Time-dials were all in motion ... 1956 ... 1970 ... 2000 ... A new century....

Again I gazed out through the bull's-eye. The same blurred landscape of luminous grey. No! There was movement now! Things through the years changing, the sum of their tiny daily movements now becoming visible. I gazed to the south; with a slow crawling movement of blurred grey detail, I could see the rising oncoming city. Towering giants of buildings were blurred against the monochrome of sky. Silently the monstrous grey city engulfed us. We were indoors.

2100 A.D. ... 2200 ...

New centuries ... progress.... For a breath that might have been a hundred years it seemed that we were in some huge amphitheatre, with a vast domed roof high above us. Then the roof was leprous. A catastrophe of nature? An earthquake, or some great storm? Or the ravages of war? Then the roof was gone. Walls again were rising.

2400 A.D. ... I found Groat standing gazing at Dora. "We will be there in a moment. I have set the automatic controls. Come Dora—"

He extended his powerful long-fingered hand toward her; but a sudden impulse made me move between them.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll guide her."

2500 ... 2520 ... 2530 ... Then I could count the years.... Then the months of 2536. And then days of the summer.

Outside one of the other bull's eyes a soft steady violet light was visible—the interior of a room in which now our cage was standing. I could see a blurred, nearby wall. The cage was wafting slowly upward a foot or so to take a slightly new position in Space.

Then the automatic controls snapped off. The cage bars went dark. Faint distant sound was audible.

Groat slid the door open. "Come Dora, my child—my home—we are here."

I held her arm to guide her as we stepped over the vehicle's threshold into the world of 2536.

It was a long grey apartment, with a vaulted roof from which a soft light was streaming. A heavy piled grey carpet was on the floor; the walls were grey-draped, windowless. Luxurious padded metal furniture stood about. Mechanisms of daily life routine were on a wall instrument panel.

"The place where I was born," Groat said softly. "You like it?"

Our little garden! Crowded bit of Space, with only Time to hold separate its myriad aspects! And Groat added as I seated Dora in a chair:

"You—my visitors from the barbaric past—" He was smiling so that his thin lips bared his shining white teeth. "I will get the surgeon—Dora must see my home. See—me—"

He made an aerial connection. On a luminous screen the image of a face appeared. A man of ruddy complexion with a shining bald pate. His shoulders disclosed that he was robed in immaculate white.

"Doctor Freane? We need you," Groat said.

"Oh—you, Xax VI?"

"Yes—Sah Groat—you know me. The Master bids you come—an eye operation—at once—"

Presently a low tinkling bell sounded. The surgeon and two white-robed women entered. They went instantly about their work with Dora—lenses and lights to examine her eyes—surgical instruments. They hardly spoke. But they stared at the time cage, and at me and Dora—to them queer barbaric people of history.

The surgeon, hardly interrupting his work, said abruptly:

"Groat—your Master should not use that cage. You have stopped in the twentieth century—these people are from there, by the look of them."

"Yes," Groat agreed.

"But it is forbidden," the surgeon said. "Your permit is for exploratory time traveling, but never to stop in another Time-world."

"I am returning these visitors," Groat said. "It will not occur again."

"Make your Master understand it, Groat. It is not like Jason XI—himself so great a scientist—to transgress his permit."

I stood tense, holding Dora's trembling hand as I watched the operation. Painless, swift and sure. A minute? Five minutes? Then suddenly, as all the apparatus was whisked away, the surgeon plunged the room almost into darkness.

"Now child, open your eyes." His voice was gentle.

Dora's eyelids fluttered up. The light! She gasped. Her blue-eyed gaze swung toward the sound of my tense, excited breathing.

"Why—why Alan—I see you! Alan dear—"

Civilization marching upward. Progress. Always progress.

For that moment I held the tearful Dora, both of us flooded with thankfulness. The nurses quietly had departed. The surgeon stood beside us. Groat had momentarily gone into the time cage.

And suddenly in the grey restful hush of the dim apartment there came a groan! A low scraping thump! A man groaning in mortal agony!

We stood transfixed. From a dark nearby recess a figure appeared, crawling, hitching itself forward on the padded floor. A man of middle age. Dying. One of his arms and shoulder seemed partly burned away by a searing flash.

He gasped faintly, "You Freane? Help! I am—"

The surgeon swung. I heard him murmur, "By my God—you, Jason—"

"I am—finished—you can't—" His agonized face dropped against the floor. He was dead.

In the silence, Dora gave a low scream of horror as she shuddered against me. Then a violet flash hissed. For just an instant Freane, the surgeon, seemed to stand tottering, leprous with part of his body burned away. Then he fell.

A second or two. I had no time to move. I saw, in the doorway of the cage, that Groat was standing with a luminous cylinder in his hand. The skin of his face was wrinkled into a snarl that bared his white teeth.

"Stand still—" he rasped.

Around us, from his cylinder, the hissing violet light sprang circular, so that we stood barred. Then Groat snapped off his weapon. The light vanished. Some of the room drapes were burning.

"If you try to trick me—both of you will die," Groat said softly. "You Alan—lead her here—" Then he laughed with a wild sudden triumph. "I forgot. She can see now. A woman complete. Come, you two—"

He stood beside the doorway, watching with alert weapon. I saw that from head to foot he was trembling; his voice was a low, purring growl; his eyes, luminous with triumph, seemed to dart fire at us.

"We are going," he said. "Get inside."

A madman! For just an instant I hesitated. Then I drew Dora over the threshold. Behind us Groat came in. The door clicked. And like a pouncing animal Groat leaped for the controls. The cage flooded with luminosity, surged with electrical hum.

The shock of starting was far greater than before. Then as our senses steadied, I found that Dora had dropped into a chair and that I was standing beside her. From the instrument table came Groat's voice: "We travel fast this time. Do not move—I can kill you with a movement of my finger—"

I glanced out through the bull's-eye. Already the walls of the draped apartment were gone; the cage was outdoors with blurred grey terraces of the giant city looming everywhere into the sky around us. And Dora with her new-found sight, was gazing; so amazed, awed, confused that her senses seemed numbed.

Then I got my wits. I turned slowly to regard Groat. He sat facing us, sprawled tense at the instrument table, one of his hands on the controls, the other gripping his weapon.

"The trip back won't take long?" I said.

His grin bared his teeth. "Back? We are going forward. A real voyage now—" He glanced at his instruments. "4152. You see, we are making speed."

I stared at him, numbed, helpless, wordless. And then I murmured, "Forward? But why, Groat?"

He said, with a mounting wild triumph, "I do not like my Time-world. Nor yours. We are going forward—very far. Where we can be alone! Dora—complete woman now. And I—Sah Groat—complete man. We will pick ourselves a time in this same Space—to be alone—to start a new race. Jason said it can't be done—it's against all laws of nature. But I'll show him—I'll outsmart Time!"

I sat numbed, shuddering. Was he wholly demented, or a rational fiend? He added. "A new race—from one mated pair. It can be made biologically possible. And you Alan—our servant. You will be useful with your health and strength in so many ways. Do not talk to me now. I am busy—I must select our home."

He still was alert with his weapon. I did not dare move. Strange little Dora. In the sudden emergency now, her confusion was vanishing. As though with the passing of her blindness, here was a new Dora. And suddenly she whispered:

"Alan—if we could get that weapon—"

But how? His fingers never left it. My own confusion was passing. I was tense, alert, watchful—but I tried not to show it.

"Look outside!" Groat said. "The real changes are beginning."

We swept past the year 10,000....

Amazing grey, shifting panorama outside our little window. I could see now over a vast distance. The Titanic city was spread everywhere. The old familiar outlines of the enduring hills were changed now. Altered by the mechanisms of man. Beacon lights sometimes flashed for what might be a hundred years. Was this the summit of man's achievement? For a breath, the melting structures were replaced by others of their kind. Mankind resting on the summit. Then I saw a section of the vast intricate structures melt down, crumbling from some catastrophe. And edifices, smaller, rose up.

Our forward Time-sweep was so swift now that I could see only the broad fundamental changes. Triumphant city neglected. Then at last it broke up and dropped into ruin and desolation.

50,000 A.D. Then 100,000.... Innumerable smaller cities had appeared and vanished. Always smaller. More transitory.... Struggling little hamlets whose life span was so brief to my sight that they came and went like flickering shadows.... I saw the blurred changes of great storms. Gigantic cataclysms of nature.... Pitiful remnants of mankind, still struggling here.

200,000 years ... 500,000.... Ice had come and gone.... Then the grey of a temperate, perhaps habitable climate.... Human beings still here?... Probably. But their futile, pitiful efforts were so briefly enduring that I could not see them....

Suddenly Dora and I became aware of Groat's voice. "Why—I—I've gone too far. We do not want to live in so wretched a place as this. I will turn back." He still held his weapon. His gaze still eagerly consumed Dora's beauty. I felt her tense beside me. But he did not touch the controls. He seemed thinking only of Dora's beauty. And he added abruptly:

"Come here, Dora—you sit here by me. We must pick our future home."

She stood up. "I'll make a chance for you!" she whispered swiftly.

Amazing little Dora. Smilingly she sat beside him, with his burning gaze upon her face and his hand like a claw gripping her shoulder. With a sudden startled amazement her glance went to the window. The end of the world! It was a great, soundless, blurred chaos. The Earth was gone! Numbed, I stared, as Dora was staring. Around us now there was only an illimitable grey void with the blurred streaks of stars. Soon perhaps, it would be empty of everything.

Eternity.... We were trapped here. Trapped in eternal, soundless emptiness.... Eternity, stretching on and on—into the infinitude of Forever....

Groat seemed engrossed only with Dora. Madman, plunging us on into the endless void.... I saw presently that as he gazed with his smoldering eyes upon her beauty, his hand laid his weapon momentarily on the table. I tensed. And Dora's hand, moving to touch him as though with a caress, dropped suddenly down and swept the weapon to the floor.

With a rasping scream Groat was on his feet, meeting my leap. The impact of my body knocked him backward. He fell, with his head and shoulder striking against a chair.... Gruesome fall! He lay twitching, his mouth gaping, eyes wildly rolling, and a low, rasping, grinding pant issuing from his lips. Then the light went out of his eyes.

I stood gripping Dora. "Dead," I murmured. "We're safe now. I can work the controls. I saw how he did it."

"Yes. Safe now—Alan—"

The body of Groat lay still. I stepped over him. I moved the control levers, slowly through the different intensities of Time-change. And then presently we were heading back.

"Alan—dear God—"

At Dora's terrified clutch I swung from the instruments. Groat again was twitching. His body rolled across the room. His head dangled on his broken neck. His skull had split open.

What was this? A human brain, enmeshed with tiny wires! In the brief struggle I had torn away his shirt. Imbedded in the flesh of his chest was the circular disc of a fuse-box!

Damnably thing in human form! Parts of a man, body and brain, pieced together in the laboratory by the skill of science! A thing that should have been under the will-control of a Master. With a flash of realization I recalled the surgeon's words. He had mentioned the Master! The scientist, Jason XI, who undoubtedly had invented the time cage. And created this thing which was a man in everything but the lack of soul. That indeed, was what I had sensed missing in its eyes! This damnably thing, running amok, stealing the cage, roaming aimlessly through the centuries—attracted by Dora.

In that moment as we stared, the deranged human body lurched waveringly upon its feet. The legs were buckling. It fell against the door. The pressure slid open the door. For a moment the staggering body toppled on the brink. Then it was gone, swallowed by the silent grey void of Eternity.

[The end of *Trapped in Eternity* by Ray Cummings]