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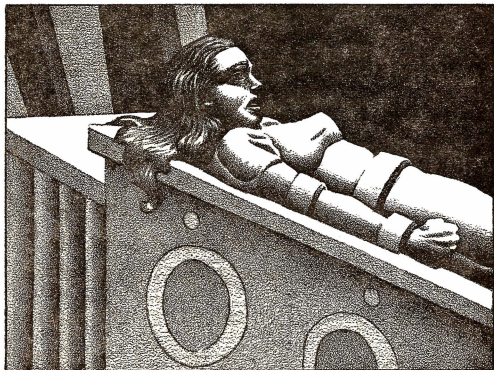
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PRISONER OF TIME



CHAPTER ONE

Science, Unlimited

Five hundred years had she waited, the girl of eternal youth, to live out her life span in a terrible tomorrow—marked for death by the race she had created!



LUCY GRANTHAM stared in abject terror at the steadily leveled weapon aimed directly at her heart. It was not an ordinary automatic; it was not the sort of weapon she had ever seen before. Everything owned and created by Bryce Field was far advanced of normal. He was a master-scientist, a demon, cruel, ruthless. That much the girl knew.

Her eyes moved slowly from the weapon to Bryce Field's face. It was lean-

By
POLTON
CROSS



jawed, sunken-eyed. Lank, untidy hair sprawled across his massive forehead. Behind his spare, sinewy form sprawled the instrument-littered wall of this deep underground cavern.

"So you thought you could play around with the affections of Bryce Field, did you?" he asked slowly. "You thought you could make love to me, get me wanting you madly, then kick me out! Yes, kick me out for that two-cent salesman!"

"Bryce, listen to me!" Lucy's voice was trembling, imploring, as she made a hesitant step forward. "I married Reggie

Dell because I love him. I never could love you; you are too clever, too brilliantly scientific—"

"Shut up!" Field thrust out his hand and sent the girl sprawling to the cavern floor. He went on savagely, "I called for you today to take you for a ride, you thought. Just old friends with a lot to say to each other! Old friends!" He spat the words. "I called to bring you here, deep underground, where you are now. I'm going to show you what it means to stand me up, Lucy. I've planned a mighty punishment for you!"

The girl stared up at him from the floor, her blue eyes filled with horror, panic.

"You're mad, Bryce! Stark mad! Otherwise you—"

"Perhaps I am mad with jealousy," he admitted callously. "All I know is that if I can't have you, then neither shall Reginald Dell, or anyone else! You didn't like my science, you say. You will like it even less by the time I'm through with you!"

Stooping suddenly he reached down and caught the girl's arm, dragged her to her feet. Brutally he sent her stumbling through the cavern doorway into yet another cavern.

Lucy stared around dazedly upon scientific machinery she could not hope to understand. Fear, overwhelming and complete, surged through her being as Field followed her in, locking the door behind him.

He stood with his back to it, his smile gashing his face like a crooked scar.

"This is one time, my dear," he said slowly, "when you will listen and listen well to some science. Take a look about you, upon these tubes, these magnets, that table with the straps."

She stared at the places indicated as though mesmerized. Then she found her tongue suddenly.

"Bryce, you've got to let me out of here!" Her voice was a hoarse scream. "You dare not do anything to me! You dare not, I say! Reggie will find you and—"

"Reggie!" Bryce Field sneered. "That miserable, narrow-browed dolt? What do you think he could do to me, one of the greatest scientists this age has ever known? No, my dear, he will do nothing. What is more, when I am finished with you I shall strike him down. Yes, him—and that squealing little brat you brought into the world. I shall destroy all three of you!"

As the girl stared at him with misty, hopeless eyes, he went on, "You have only yourself to blame, Lucy. You could have had me and all the power and wealth science has brought me. You chose differently—and for that I have decided there is a price!"

"Who are you to decide my life?" Lucy asked frantically. Flinging herself forward she drove her puny fists into his granitelike face. He did not budge an inch, but finally he threw her away from him.

"Mad," she whispered. "Always an egomaniac, and now it has completely gotten you! You're insane, Bryce! Insane!"

HE WAS motionless for a moment; then, suddenly putting aside his weapon, he strode forward, gripped the girl in his powerful arms and dumped her on the long steel table against which she had fallen. Before she realized what was happening, the straps upon it were being buckled into place, across her throat, her waist, her knees.

"Bryce," she whispered. "What are you going to do?"

"Plenty!" He surveyed her pinioned form and smiled coldly. "But first I've one or two things to tell you, things connected with that science you so detest.

"You are going on a long journey, my dear," he finished. "So long a journey that even I, master-scientist, do not know where it will end. A journey into the future—alone!"

The girl wriggled desperately in the straps, relaxed again with rasping breath. Her eyes fixed themselves on Bryce Field's merciless visage.

"You, Lucy, shall be the victim of entropy!" he said softly. "Naturally, you don't know what entropy is, do you?"

"You know I don't!" she shrieked. "Bryce, stop torturing me like this. Let me go!"

"Entropy," he stated calmly, as though delivering a lecture, "is the increasing disorder of the universe, the process by which the universe gradually moves towards thermodynamic equilibrium. It can be likened to a perpetual shuffling, the disorder getting worse with every shuffle. Just like disordering a deck of cards when playing bridge with Reggie and your thin-brained friends."

"Bryce, Bryce, in God's name—"

"If only you had read Eddington while at school you might know something about entropy," Bryce Field sighed. "However, I have made it as clear as I can. Recently—" His tone changed to grim menace—"I fell to wondering what would happen if I created a non-entropy state, wherein nothing ever happened! So I decided to create a specified area—in this cavern to be exact—wherein molecular shuffling would achieve sudden and absolute equilibrium, a space wherein the ultimate of entropy would be reached instantly, instead of in a thousand, a million, ten million years time. Do you understand me?"

Lucy was beyond answering.

"Yes," he said, his voice harsh with grim triumph, "I discovered how to create an entropy globe—a globe of force whose walls have attained absolute equilibrium, whose vibrations extend inwards to everything inside the globe. Therefore, whatever is in the globe will be plunged into a state of non-time. Entropy will be halted. Progress will stop!

"You," he said slowly, "are going to be in that globe, Lucy! At your feet is one magnet, at your head another. Between them they will build up the hemisphere of the entropy globe, and within it, time for you will cease to be. You will be plunged into an eternal 'now' from which release may never come—or, if it does, it will be at a far distant time when scientists as clever as I find the way to unlock your prison."

"Bryce, I beg of you," Lucy implored huskily. "Let me go! I'll do anything you want! Anything! I'll divorce Reggie— But you can't do this to me! I've so much to live for. My baby, the future. *You can't do it!*"

"On the wall there," he said impersonally, "is a calendar, placed so I hope you can see it. See the date? Seventeenth of July, Nineteen Forty-one. Remember that well!"

"Bryce! You cannot—"

He flung a switch, keeping clear of the table as he did so. Immediately an impalpable bubble of unknown forces—clearer than glass—inclosed the girl completely, swallowed up the steel table on which she lay. She was stopped in mid-motion of raising her head, her last sentence truncated.

BRYCE FIELD waited a moment or two, brooding eyes on the many gauges; then he turned and moved slowly to her, stood contemplating her.

Her lips were slightly parted; her blue eyes still stared at him, unseeing—eyes that were frozen and yet somehow still alive. Bryce Field's gaze went up and down her slim form in its brown silk frock, along the steel table, over the four leather straps that bound her, to the beechwood cradle that was supporting her head and shoulders.

Bryce Field smiled the smile of the goddess when he saw her gold wristwatch had stopped at exactly 4:15. Time was no more inside that globe. Entropy was halted by reason of the globe's walls themselves having already achieved the ultimate of shuffling in their constitution.

"A year—fifty years—fifty centuries." Bryce Field said the words half to himself.

Then he turned back to his switchboard and examined the maze of instruments minutely. He waited perhaps half an hour, then cut the power out of the

magnets at either end of the girl. A low, exultant sigh escaped him as he saw that the globe remained where it was, self-sustained, eternally balanced, a small foretaste of what the universe itself must some day achieve by natural means.

"If there is a key to open it—a random element to restore the shuffling—I do not know of it, nor do I want it. None—none shall unlock this prison!"

Bryce Field nodded to himself, then, pulling out a plunger, he waited a moment and stepped back. In a sudden blaze of light and explosion the entire switchboard blew itself to atoms, tearing out part of the wall with it.

Field turned to the mighty door of the cavern, took one last look at the motionless girl in the motionless globe. Then he closed the door upon her and locked it. With the face of a dead man he went silently through the adjoining cavern, into the tunnel that led to the surface.

"Dell and the brat," he murmured. "They must go too—"

But the thought was dashed from his mind as there suddenly came a vast and ominous rumbling. He looked up with a start, flashing the beam of his torch. He was in time to see the tunnel roof fissuring along its whole length. In a flash he realized what had occurred, remembering the crack in the cavern wall which had followed the wrecking of the switchboard. The underground place had been savagely shaken, and now—

The truth had no sooner formulated in his mind than he saw a vast mass of rubble and stone hurtling down towards him.

CHAPTER TWO

Time Barrier

CLEM BRADLEY, chief of the Roton Gun Engineering Company, mopped his face with his sweat rag and settled his steel helmet

a bit more comfortably upon his head.

"Guess another thousand feet should see this foundation space fully cleared," he commented, gazing around at the surging activity. "We've been cutting clean for the last month, and the next push should finish it."

Square-jawed, thick-necked Buck Cardew nodded. From appearances there was little to choose between the two men. They were both big and muscular. But in Clem Bradley there reposed the brains of the team, brains whose scientific bent had created the amazing blast gun which was the basis for the Roton Gun Company. In Buck Cardew lay the brawn and iron fists necessary to control endless gangs of men at work.

"Yes, this job came as manna from heaven," Clem went on reflectively. "If the City Planners hadn't decided to put a mile-high building here we'd still be trying to sell our gun to a bunch of money-grubbing misfits. As it is, we're sitting pretty. The company's on its feet to stay. Even the Master acknowledges that."

"Yeah," Cardew agreed; then he let out a throaty bellow that went echoing across the great hollowed space. "Hey, there! What in hell are you guys wasting time about over there? Stop standing around talking and get on with the job!"

"Can't!" megaphoned the foreman. "There's a barrier here that even the blast gun won't cut! Come and take a look."

"He's nuts," Clem growled. "That gun of mine will blast anything in Earth or space. Maybe they're plumb sick of groping about down here! And I don't blame 'em!"

"They're paid for it, good and plenty," Buck Cardew retorted. "I'll soon settle 'em. Let's go!"

They strode through the loose rubble to the flood-lit space where the men were standing around the apparatus. Cardew put his hands on his hips and stared at

the barrier facing the gun's blunted nozzle.

"Turn it on there!" he ordered.

A blasting, ear-shattering roar instantly followed, but that stream of livid, tearing energy, which had been known to go through successive walls of steel, granite, and diamond, simply deflected itself in a coiling streamer of blinding blue sparks.

"Off!" Clem yelled. "What do you want to do, blow us up with a backlash?" Then, as the commotion died down, he clambered to the barrier and examined it carefully. It seemed to be black.

"Kill those lights!" he ordered. The moment they went out and darkness descended, it became clear that the area was not black but swarming with violet radiance. There seemed to be a multitude of pinpricks of light floating around in a vast bowl.

"What in hell is it?" Cardew demanded, as the light resumed.

"Stated simply—force," Clem answered, puzzled. "Force built up into a resilient wall which simply deflects our gun blast, much the same as the force-shields on our modern spaceships deflect meteorites. Hm-m, looks like we've struck something. Have to weigh it up."

He stepped back and started making a rough plan and sketch of the situation. Then, under his directions, prompted by Buck Cardew's bellowing voice, the gun was trained until it hit ordinary rock around the edge of the area. Gradually they forced a way around until the blue area remained isolated.

Mystified, the two men clambered through into a deep cavern and stood staring in the light of their helmet lamps.

"Wow!" Cardew ejaculated suddenly. "Take a look!"

CLEM swung, then his jaw dropped as they gazed through the impenetrable wall of the thing that had deflected their gun. There was a

girl, strapped to a table, her eyes staring unseeingly, her pretty face terrified.

"She isn't moving," Cardew whispered blankly. "Say, she looks as though she's imprisoned inside a globe of force. But—but who the devil is she, anyway?" he went on in amazement. "Look at her clothes! Girls haven't worn stuff like that for—for centuries!"

Clem's mind swung instantly to the scientific implications. He hurried around the cavern, examining it quickly, the astounded engineers piling in after him and dazedly contemplating the girl in the globe.

At last Clem halted, rubbing his jaw.

"Bits and pieces lying about suggest that this place was once a laboratory. God knows how long ago, though. What we've got to do is break down this globe of force somehow."

"How?" Cardew demanded. "If a blast gun won't do it, it's certain nothing else will."

"If it was created artificially—and it probably was—it can be uncreated," Clem replied. He turned to the men. "Okay, boys, keep on with your job. We've still got a time schedule, remember. I'll use instruments on this and see what I can find out."

The foreman nodded and blasting resumed, cutting a vast path at the back of the place. Clem gave quick instructions and had various instruments brought in to him. He figured steadily from their readings, quite oblivious to the shattering din going on around him. After a while Cardew came to his side, hands on hips.

"Well?" His keen eyes aimed eager questions. "Any clues?"

"Incredible ones," Clem answered in a marveling voice. "It looks as though somebody way back in the past solved a scientific problem which still puzzles us even today. That globe, if the readings here are true, registers zero! It isn't there!"

"You crazy, or am I?" Cardew asked bluntly. "Of course it's damn well there! We can see it!"

Clem waved to the instruments. Sure enough they all registered zero. Cardew scratched his head.

"What the devil is the explanation then?"

"It's something, so far as I can figure, that has no entropy. If that is so, it means it has reached absolute equilibrium. There is no interchange of energy to register. A little universe all on its own which has achieved the state our own universe will one day attain. It is the same now, possibly, as when it came into being. It is apart from all known forces for that very reason. It is apart from light, radiation, heat—everything. You see it cannot assimilate anything more because it is assimilated to maximum. Nothing can go into this bubble, or out of it."

Cardew blew out his cheeks expressively. "Then how do we smash it?"

"Only one thing we can perhaps do—warp it. Gravitation alone is independent of all other forces. Today we know that for certain. Gravity is a warp in space-time, not a force. We have gravitator-plates down here for shifting rocks. Maybe twin stresses brought to a focus would warp this ball of absolute force and cause a rupture— Yeah, it's worth trying!" Clem finished quickly. "This is the weirdest set-up ever!"

More instructions followed and gravitator-screens of vast size were erected in the positions Clem stipulated. A past master in stresses and strains, he knew just what he was doing; but whether it would work on the globe or not was problematical. It was an hour before he was satisfied, Cardew getting more impatient all the time; but at last the signal was given.

Simultaneously the power was flung on, a power duplicating exactly the etheric

warps of gravitation itself. What happened then was never to be forgotten!

THE globe burst with an explosion that hurled the men flat against the wall, pinned them there under an outflowing wave of gigantic, hair-bristling force. The screens overturned and went crashing into the rocks. A rumble, as of deep thunder, rolled throughout the underground cavern and died away in the far distance.

Slowly the sense of released electrical tension began to abate, but the place crawled with the odor of ozone. Clem stood up gradually, turned, expecting to see the girl blasted to pieces. But she was alive, moving.

"—do this to me!" she cried desperately, and strained and wriggled in her straps.

"Not only alive, but fighting!" Cardew whispered, seizing Clem's arm. "Why didn't she die when that thing blew up?"

"Because the force expanded outwards from her. She was as safe as though in the dead center of a cyclone."

Clem strode forward and gazed at the girl's face. A most extraordinary expression came over her delicate features as she stared into the grimy visages under the steel helmets. Her blue eyes widened in further alarm.

"What—who—who are you?" she breathed weakly, going limp in the straps. "Where is Bryce?"

"Bryce?" Clem shot her a baffled glance; then leaning over he unbuckled the straps and raised her gently. He fished in his hip pocket, spun the top from a flask and held the opening to her lips. The fiery liquid, something she had never tasted before, went through her veins like liquid dynamite, set her heart and nerves bounding with sudden life.

Flushed, she looked in bewilderment at the puzzled men.

"Where is Bryce?" she insisted.



"Bryce Field. He locked me in here."

"Never heard of him," Cardew said bluntly. "We—"

Clem cut him short, looked at the girl with his serious gray eyes.

"You said something just as you recovered. What was it?"

"I said 'Bryce, you cannot do this to me!'"

"No." Clem shook his head. "You only said '—do this to me!' The first three words were missing. I remember, because it sounded so odd. I presume this Bryce Field was in here when you started to say those words?"

"Yes—yes, of course he was. He was

going to throw a power switch which would have—"

The girl's voice trailed off as she stared round the cavern at the unfamiliar blasting machinery.

"But—but everything's different!" Her voice caught a little. "There is no switchboard now, no door. Who are you?"

When they did not answer, her gaze swung to the calendar—or rather to the place where it should have been. There was only a mass of crumbled rock.

"There was a calendar there. It said July seventeenth, Nineteen Forty-one," she gasped out. "Where has it gone?"

"Nineteen Forty-one!" Cardew yelled.

"Hell! No wonder you're in such old-fashioned clothes! Do you realize that this is August ninth, Twenty-four Fifty?"

The color went from her face. "Twenty-four fifty," she repeated mechanically. "Why, that's—that's five hundred years! It can't be true! It can't!"

"I'm afraid it is," said Clem quietly, studying her. "But we can't even begin to understand until we hear your side of the story. Who are you? What happened in here?"

"I'm Lucy Grantham and—" Slowly the story unfolded. The men listened in grim silence, looked at each other when it was over.

"Wish I could have taken a sock at that Bryce Field," said Cardew reflectively, his fists clenched. "I'd have smeared him all over the cavern wall."

"Five centuries!" Lucy repeated again, aghast. "I don't understand it! What am I to do? Do you realize what has really happened to me?"

"You felt nothing during this enormous lapse of time?" Clem asked thoughtfully.

"Nothing whatever. Except that I seem to remember I felt a passing wave of dizziness when Bryce threw in that switch. Even then I hardly realized that he had thrown the switch. I could see nothing through the bubble wall. Then, in what seemed a matter of seconds, certainly no longer, you appeared. And so now," the girl finished hopelessly, "I am utterly alone. My husband long since dead; and my baby too, presuming he grew up."

"Unfortunately," Clem sighed, "we can't put back the clock. All we can do is offer you our hospitality." He rubbed his jaw uncertainly, explained rather uneasily, "You see, things have changed a lot while you have been a prisoner. Today everybody is tabulated and indexed, and you're a sort of odd girl out. If your lack of an index card is discovered you may be—executed," he finished somberly.

"Executed!" Lucy stared at them in horror.

"Anybody without an index card, without even a proven line of descent, like you, is deemed outcast by the Governing Council or else the Master himself, and promptly wiped out. Spying and sabotage is crushed that way. We have to be very careful. A new war is threatening."

"There is still war?" the girl asked wearily. "There was a similar state of affairs when I was trapped. Europe was in a ferment; so was Asia—"

Clem smiled faintly. "Long forgotten, Miss Grantham. This is Earth against Venus; something to do with planetary concessions. But it's war just the same, and that being so your position is extremely difficult."

"But surely you could explain the situation?"

"Not on the basis of what I know so far," Clem sighed. "I don't even begin to understand the genius of this man Bryce Field. I'll have to work out exactly what he did and then submit the proof to the Master. Once that is passed you will get City status and will be quite safe. But in the meantime—"

"There's my wife," Buck Cardew said. "She was to have Worker Thirty-nine Zee to assist her in house duties. I could arrange it that Thirty-nine Zee is bought off and Miss Grantham takes her place. It's been done before, and could be again. How about it?"

"Good!" Clem assented. "We'll do that; then I can keep in touch with you," he added, looking at the girl. "For the moment you had better stay here with us and then come along home after dark. We'll look after you—and you'll have an awful lot to see," he finished. "Things have changed a lot since Nineteen Forty-one."

"I can imagine," Lucy said, and gave her first smile.

IN THE wilderness of the City's major power room, Chief Engineer Collins studied the peculiarity with cold blue eyes. For the first time in thirty years' supervision of this master powerhouse something was wrong. The smooth night and day rhythm of the giant engines, fostered and tendered by slender robots, was being interrupted. There was the slightest flaw in the uptake of power. Perhaps it was only carbon dust. It had happened before—but that was years ago.

Collins summoned testing-robots. They came up with their many instruments and gathered about him, obeying all the commands he gave into their almost reasoning brain-pans. With mathematical exactitude, far keener than even his masterly reasoning could produce, they discovered the flaw and handed out the report.

"Intermission fault of one ten-thousandth of a second," Collins mused. "Bad! Definitely bad!"

He slammed in switches and was connected immediately with slave powerhouses in other parts of the city.

"What's your power report?" he snapped.

It was given him immediately. There was nothing wrong there, but there was here, and what was more it was getting worse. The sweetly humming giant had taken on a definite lobbing sound, like the thud of a flat on a smooth road.

Struck with the unbelievable thought that there might be a flaw in the steel, Collins turned to the gigantic balance wheel which formed the balance of the master-engine. He had just reached it when the thing happened.

A pear-shaped swelling appeared suddenly on the edge of the wheel, only visible as a mist with the wheel's rotation. It grew at lightning speed—and then exploded! Flung by centrifugal force, mighty pieces of metal went to all

parts of the powerhouse. One struck Collins clean in the face and dropped him dead where he stood. The robots looked on impartially, their guiding genius lying mangled on the floor.

Immediately the other engines ceased to work as an automatic contact breaker clamped down on the whole area. The alarms rang. The emergency bulb went up on the desk of the chief power engineer at City Center.

Breakdown, for the first time in thirty years. Incredible!

CLEM BRADLEY, Cardew and the girl were in Bradley's little auto-bus doing two hundred miles an hour down the traffic way bridge to City Center when the power went off. All of a sudden the vast, long line of light and steel which had held the girl in thrall went into total darkness.

"What in hell—!"

Clem let out a gasp of amazement, then his hands tightened instantly on the switches. Never in his experience had he met up with a sudden blackout like this. He slammed on the emergency brake, but either he slammed too hard or the steel was faulty, for the pedal snapped right off under the pressure! He was too astounded, too desperately busy to exclaim about it. Like a madman he tried to cut down the power of the engine as they raced onwards into the unrelieved dark bridge girders whipping past them against the stars.

"Hey, stop the damned thing!" Buck Cardew yelled. "There may be something ahead, and at this speed— Where's your searchlamp?"

"Switch it on for me," Clem panted. "I've all I can handle."

The girl sat in frozen alarm with wind rushing past her face as Cardew fumbled. Then suddenly the blinding cold-light brilliance split the dark ahead.

"Look!" Lucy screamed.

But Clem had already seen it too—the unbelievable—a titanic fissure glowing oddly across the traffic way itself. The bridge was breaking in two! And below was a mile drop into the brimming waters of the diverted Hudson.

"Jump it!" Cardew yelled. "Full belt! You'll just make it!"

The why and wherefore flashed unanswered in Clem's brain. He gave the autobus all it had, shot over the crumbling edge of the fissure and slammed with shattering force onto the other side of the bridge. So enormous was the shock the front wheel axle snapped like a carrot, slewed the car around, plastered it with splintering impact against the cross girders at the bridge side.

Then it came to a standstill, somehow still upright.

"Wow!" Cardew whistled. "That was close— Hey, you okay?"

He heaved Lucy up beside him.

"Yes, I'm all right, but—" She stared in terror at the waters far below, then back at the still enlarging gap in the bridge. "But—but what's wrong?" she finished.

"Search me!" Clem snapped. "First my brake pedal broke like a match stick; then this front axle gave way, and the bridge too is rapidly—"

He broke off and stared as headlights flashed into view on the distant dark stretch.

"They'll go over!" he yelled, vaulting over the car's side. "Got to warn them!"

He went pelting back along the bridge, pulling out the safety red light he used underground as he went. Desperately he waved it to and fro. He saw, as the first vehicle came hurtling nearer, that it was a public service bus. Closer—closer, until he saw its number plate. It registered mechanically in his mind; KT/897.

"Stop!" he screamed helplessly. "Stop, you fool!"

But the driver saw his danger too late. The bus went plunging over the edge of

the broken bridge, the private autobus behind it following suit. Dazed with horror Clem watched both vehicles go hurtling down into the wastes below. The cries of the doomed people came up to him like a ghastly echo.

"My God," he whispered. "Oh, my God—"

"Can't call the emergency station, either," Cardew said, coming up. "If the bridge is cracked, the wires will be too." He stopped, his eyes goggling as he stared at the fissure. "Will you look at that? The crack's widening!"

"I know." Clem's voice was grim as he shifted his eyes from the depths below. "There's something damnably wrong here. First the light and power goes off; then this—"

"Altogether," Lucy said quietly, "an inauspicious beginning for the wonder world of Twenty-four Fifty!"

Clem did not even seem to hear her.

"It's incredible that steel should start behaving this way," he whispered. "Forgetting the brake and axle on the autobus for the moment, take the case of this bridge. For a hundred years it has been regularly overhauled. Yet now it looks as though it has atomic blight. Remember, Buck, we had trouble with a blight some years back?"

"SURE, but we got over that. Still, it does look similar."

The three of them turned suddenly as an emergency official car came speeding up from behind them. A uniformed bridge officer jumped out.

"What's gone wrong here?" Then, with characteristic speed, he took in the situation, turned to his men. "Send a radio call to have the bridge closed at both ends. Had a smash, eh?" he went on, eyeing the crumpled autobus.

"Yeah, just leapt the gap in time," Clem said.

"I don't get this set-up at all," the

officer went on. "This steel here is like treacle, just melting away— Same thing happened in the chief powerhouse, I hear. Flywheel went soft or something and just blew apart. Well, let's have your index cards."

Cardew handed over his while Clem tried to do some fast thinking for the anxious girl. The officer got to the girl at last. She looked at him uneasily, fumbling needlessly in the borrowed tunic she was wearing.

"Well, well, miss, come on!" the officer snapped. "I haven't all night to waste!"

"I—er—I seem to have lost my card."

"Sure you did," Clem said, trying to sound at ease. "Remember, when we were out of town something fell? Must have been your card!"

The officer looked suspicious. "Number?"

"Thirty-nine Zee," Clem said. "She—"

"Zee is Domestic Classification," the

officer snapped. "What is she doing way out here, coming from the city outskirts?"

"Just a ride," said Buck Cardew steadily.

"Hmmm— See you produce your index card at Headquarters tomorrow, without fail." The officer handed her a ticket. "Now you'd all three better get off the bridge. What's left of your car will be returned to you later. Move along, please."

They turned away, glanced at each other in the dim light.

"That," said Cardew, "was an uncomfortably near thing. But I guess we can square it all right tomorrow with Thirty-nine's card."

"Yeah," Clem muttered absently.

"Queer," the girl said, "that a bridge of steel should melt like that, and a powerhouse flywheel, and the brake on your car! Or is it something quite natural in this weird world of yours?"

"It's a mystery," Clem said.

"Venusian spies, more like it," Cardew grunted. "They are every place, honeycombing the Earth. Some new scientific device of theirs, I'll wager."

They finished the rest of the journey on foot, and mainly in silence, and by the time they reached Cardew's home in the city's heart, the lights had come up again and power was working normally.

Mrs. Cardew, slim, dark, and practical, was clearly discomfited by the happening—in fact very discomfited, considering.

"Something the matter, Eva?" Cardew asked her in surprise. "Outside of the blackout, I mean?"

"Yes, Buck, I—" She stopped, looked past Clem Bradley to the girl.

"Friend of mine," Clem smiled. "Miss Grantham. We found her in rather peculiar circumstances and— Well, we'll need you to help us."

"Which you can," Cardew said reassuringly. "This girl has got to have protection, and she can't get it anywhere better than right here. You see," he went on more slowly, "she is really a girl from way back—Nineteen Forty-one! An ancient American. Remember America in the history recorders?"

Eva Cardew stared blankly; then she stared some more when the full story was told to her. Finally she looked at Lucy for confirmation and the girl nodded.

"I'm afraid it's true," she sighed. "Mr. Cardew thought we could contrive to get an index card from Thirty-nine Zee—"

"That," said Eva Cardew seriously, "is what has been making me so worried. Doubly so now, indeed. A report has been issued over the radio that thirty people met their deaths tonight in the big bridge collapse. A whole bus load—and Thirty-nine Zee was among them. That's why I was looking so bothered when you arrived."

"Was it—was it Bus KT/897?" Clem whispered.

"Yes."

"Good God!" Clem said aghast. "The authorities know that Thirty-nine Zee is dead! And we told them—we told that officer—"

"Yeah," Cardew said, appalled. "So we did."

TO THE north of the city, Caleb Walsh, master-agriculturist, walked slowly down the vast synthetic area devoted entirely to the cultivation of extra hard beechwood trees. Here, under his care, government-controlled, were some two hundred saplings fed by artificial sunlight and high-powered nitrates and fertilizers.

Then, as he continued his rounds, he wheeled suddenly at the sound of smashing glass. He fell back, astounded, eyes goggling.

Four of the tender saplings had suddenly grown to titanic proportions and smashed their way through the lofty roof! It was impossible!

Yet it was there.

He went forward slowly, swallowing hard in his throat, stared up at the giants rearing through the broken glass. Their side branches too had thrust forth incredibly and smashed down all the young trees in the neighboring area. . .

Caleb Walsh reached for the visiphone with a hand that shook; he made a report in a cracked voice to the Controller of Agriculture. The controller listened sympathetically because it was not the only report he had received. From all parts of the country within a hundred-mile radius of the city, it appeared, news kept coming in of beech trees suddenly going haywire.

There was the beech tree at an old-world farm some distance out of the town, for instance. With his own eyes the astounded owner had seen it rear from a tiny sapling against the moonlight to a mammoth giant overshadowing his home. Being an old-world man, he wondered if

there had been some truth, after all, in Jack and the Beanstalk story.

CHAPTER THREE

The Past Is Present

CLEM BRADLEY, though he left Lucy Grantham at the Cardew apartment for the night, hardly had any sleep. A variety of things twisted through his mind. Mainly, he was worried about the girl: her identity would have to be proven somehow, and with the unexpected death of Thirty-nine Zee it presented an almost insoluble problem.

After a sleepless night he ate breakfast. The news was on and he listened in amazement to a long record of inexplicable happenings. The W Bridge, which he had seen fissure the previous night, had eaten itself right away through the center—then the disturbance had stopped, as mysteriously as it had begun, leaving the rest of the steel intact. Engineers were already rebuilding it, but all traffic was detoured.

Further announcements of gigantically enlarged beech trees caused Clem increasing wonder; and at the final narrative he did not know whether to laugh or be dismayed.

"An extraordinary series of incidents are reported from City Center as occurring last night," the announcer said. "Several men and women, for instance, found themselves suddenly without any shoes as their footwear melted into thin air! The same thing happened also to men's pants belts, and women's handbags. The unfortunate men dashed for the nearest safety; women screamed that they had been robbed. But neither belts nor bags were found later, though in the latter case the vanishing bags' belongings were found flung about the sidewalks. Thousands took autobuses home to avoid any further walking in stocking feet.

A well known war officer, inspecting our defenses in case of Venusian invasion, found himself with his ray gun charges and ray gun itself lying on the floor. Every supporting belt had disappeared.

"From Sector Fifty-two there is also news of a cattle disease. It appears that pigs, cows, bulls, oxen and various other varieties of animals are dying. The disease seems to be a form of old age, which so far has the veterinary experts baffled. But the authorities are beginning to suspect Venusian workers in our midst who are thus deliberately undermining our social structure. Any spies found will be mercilessly dealt with—"

Bradley switched the news off and sat thinking for a moment or two; then he hurriedly finished his breakfast and made haste for Buck Cardew's place.

"Guess we'll have to detour," he said, when they were ready to leave," according to the news. But what about Miss Grantham here? Any angles?"

"One," Clem answered briefly. "The only safe place until we dope out some satisfactory reason for the authorities is to take her to work with us. Once we have her underground she will be safe. Not even the authorities can get down there without my permission. Too dangerous."

"Right!" Cardew assented; then, glancing at the girl, "You'd better get ready."

She nodded and hurried off. Cardew looked at Clem seriously.

"Looks like a war isn't far off, eh?"

"Is it?" Clem looked surprised. "I didn't hear all the news—"

"Yeah, it's bad," Cardew muttered.

"Our ambassador to Venus—Leslie Hurst—says the situation has become worse. But say, did you hear about those other queer happenings? Missing shoes—"

"Yes, I heard that. And somehow—"

Clem stopped, then gave a little shrug. "Somehow, silly though it sounds, I'm beginning to think Lucy Grantham has

something to do with all of this!"

"What! You're crazy, man! Or do you mean the set-up we found her in was a phony and that she is a Venusian agent or something?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Clem said irritably. "Get your mind off spies for a bit. What I mean—"

He broke off as the girl came hurrying back.

"Let's go," he said briefly.

BUT at the end of the detour through the city, Bradley's neat scheme for wangling the girl out of the clutches of the law fell to pieces. He looked at Cardew, worried, as ahead of them loomed an armed cordon guarding a barrier, and each autobus or pedestrian who went through was being asked for his or her index card.

"Hell!" Cardew growled expressively. "We've sure driven right into it! And no way back either," he finished in anxiety, as he saw the stream of autobuses banked up behind them.

"Have to lie our way through as best we can; that's all," Clem shrugged. "I suppose this is the result of the odd happenings. There is a new spy clean-up going on. We'll get by—somehow."

But as they came closer, all hope collapsed, for the chief officer in charge of the examination was the very one they had encountered on the W Bridge the night before!

"Oh, you again!" he said grimly, as he beheld the three set faces in Cardew's autobus. "And you—" He looked at the girl— "said you were Thirty-nine Zee last night. We were giving you time to clear up the mistake: as it is, you can clear it up now. Thirty-nine Zee is dead. What's your explanation?"

"We can explain the circumstances perfectly," Clem said. "It is a case of mistaken identity and—"

"Case of spying you mean! What's

more, you three are going to answer several questions. Come on. Get out of that bus!"

The officer yanked out his gun menacingly; but the next second Cardew's mighty fist lifted suddenly from the driving control and plunged clean into the man's face. He went flying backwards off the running board and collapsed in the dust. Without a second's pause, Cardew flung in the switches and sent the car bounding forward.

It whipped through the line of officers tugging at their ray guns. Within seconds they were left behind. Clinging to the steering gear Cardew stared ahead with grim eyes, dodged around and behind the traffic in front of him, at last began to lose himself in the swirling tide flowing out of the city's heart.

"You dope!" Clem panted. "Do you realize what sort of a jam we'll get into for this? We'll be hauled up! We can't escape—"

"Give them a run for their money anyway," Cardew retorted. "Better all three of us are in it than just Lucy."

Clem became silent, mainly because he agreed with his impulsive friend. The girl herself said nothing, sat with tight lips between the two men, realizing more than ever the complicated, dangerous tangle she had gotten into since arriving in this amazing world of 2450.

"Okay, here we go," Cardew said at last, and twisted the little machine off into a side alley, thereby joining up with the normal route beyond the sundered bridge. Continuing at the same demoniacal pace, it was not long before he gained the immense underground slope leading to the site of works. Once below, speeding through the long dark tunnels, they all three began to breathe more freely.

"All set so far," Clem said grimly, clambering out at last. "Get the boys to work, Buck. Right now I've got some figuring to do, figuring that may save the

three of us from the lethal chamber. I've got an idea how we can explain away Lucy's presence. Carry on while I work it out. No telling when the police dragnet will catch up on us—yes, even down here."

FAR out in space, beyond the Asteroids, Commander Neil turned sharply as First Mate Swanton came hurrying into the control room.

"Something extraordinary has happened, sir! Can you spare a moment? Down in the storage rooms—"

"What about the storage rooms?"

Neil searched the man's face quickly. It was more perplexed than he had ever seen it.

"Our cargo! Something's happened! Part of it stolen—"

"The gold!" Commander Neil gasped.

"And not only the gold, sir—"

Neil's bulldog jaw set squarely, and he hurried out at Swanton's side. They went down into the belly of the mighty transport ship, and along to Hold 16. Swanton tugged open the steel door and pointed.

"There were twenty-five bars of gold here, sir; now there are only twenty-two."

"This is incredible," Neil ejaculated, checking up. "Theft in the void is not even possible! We—"

"Then there is this, sir," Swanton

went on, motioning to the numberless crates. "When we left Earth we had sixty cases full of live silkworms. Now six cases are empty and three more half empty."

"I could understand the gold being stolen," Neil said, totally baffled, "but silkworms! Even granting theft were at all possible, who the devil would want silkworms? They are only of use to Plutonians as edible matter, certainly not for silk. This," he finished grimly, "is going to need the best space investigator Earth has got."

He swung away, agitated, and back in the control room made space radio contact with Earth and reported the loss. The Controller for Space Exports listened to every detail; then he turned and switched the report over to the Master of the City.

The Master surveyed not only the silkworm reports, not only the story of gold vanishing in space—but other reports as well. Reports of gold vanishing from strong vaults in many parts of the city; of the death of cattle; the collapse of steel in many places; the mystic affair of vanishing leather; the even greater problem of hypertrophied beech trees.

Finally, lips compressed, he flicked the switch of his desk communicator.

"Find Engineers Cardew and Bradley of the Roton Gun Engineering Company without delay," he snapped out. "Bring

them here. And with them bring this unknown woman who masqueraded as Thirty-nine Zee."

THE armed guards appeared suddenly in the underground workings towards the close of the day, but though Clem and Cardew put up a stiff resistance they were finally forced to give in.

"Where's that woman you had with you?" demanded the self-same officer whom Cardew had eluded in the morning—and his cold eyes flashed over the expanse of underground working.

"Suppose you try and find out?" Clem asked bluntly. "She is innocent of any harm, and no matter what the law does, or the Master either, she stays safely hidden. Understand?"

"You're a fool," the guard shrugged. "She'll be found. Search the place!" he added to his men.

Clem glanced significantly at Cardew. The girl, concealed in a high niche of the wilderness of workings, was not likely to be even seen, let alone captured, and the boys on the job would see she was kept safe and well provisioned, since they were on a night and day shift.

"Let's go," the guard snapped at last, nonplussed. "Can't stop here all the damned night. Go on, you two—move!"

He led the way to the official autobus in the tunnel, and in a few minutes it was whirling them through the city again. Finally they were taken into the presence of the Master.

He hardly glanced up from his lake of papers as he spoke; but his hand reached out and pressed a button so that the entire interview might be recorded.

"What is your explanation, gentlemen, for shielding a woman from the authorities because she has no official index card? What is your excuse for striking an officer of the law? More directly—" The Master looked up for a moment with

cold eyes—"what is this woman's connection with mysterious acts of sabotage which began last night? Grave questions, grave implications—for you!"

"The woman," Clem said curtly, "is Lucy Grantham, of the year Nineteen Forty-one."

"Facetiousness will not help the case."

"You misunderstand me, sir," Clem said. "It is because she is a woman of Nineteen Forty-one that these things have been happening."

"I fail," said the Master icily, "to see the connection. But for your especial benefit, so that you may realize the seriousness of your behavior, I will inform you that Venusian invasion—according to Ambassador Hurst's report some days ago—is imminent at any moment. This Earth of ours is threatened by attack from the most complete scientific armada in history. It is a well known fact that Earth is riddled with spies, of which this woman—who evidently fooled you into thinking she is a denizen of Nineteen Forty-one—is a particularly blundering example. Only since her appearance has gold started to vanish and steel shown grave structural faults. Obviously atomic control at which the Venusians are adept. Then leather behaved queerly, and beech trees. Last of all we hear of a mysterious theft far out in space which not only included gold but silkworms. That, I confess, I fail to understand, but—"

"Gold—and silkworms!" Clem cried excitedly. "This cinches it! Now I know I am right!"

"Explain yourself!" the Master ordered.

Clem did so, gave in detail the story of the girl's inclosure in a non-entropy bubble, just as she had told it to him. The Master listened in attentive silence because he was scientist enough to understand every point, but at the end of it he looked skeptical.

"The theory is possible, of course—but

it still does not explain these acts of sabotage."

"It isn't sabotage, sir—it is natural law!" Clem cried. "I have spent today working out in detail a theory which I have had in mind since I found Miss Grantham. Now I'm sure it is right. You see, this scientist, Bryce Field, forgot something. If you place anything organic or inorganic in a field of none-time, you destroy the entropy. Everything in the bubble was stopped dead still. No entropy went on at all. But each article in the bubble gave off the energy which we recognize as entropy. Therefore the energy was there, but imprisoned."

The Master nodded. "And so?"

"For five hundred years," Clem went on, "a girl in a silk frock lay on a steel cube. She was cradled in a beechwood rack and tied down by leather straps. She wore a gold wrist-watch and had a gold brooch. You see, sir? For five hundred years energy was given off, but it could not escape. Entropy was there, yet held stagnant. Hence, when the globe was shattered, the energy of entropy-change went out in an overpowering wave and sought out the original atomic formations from which it had sprung. It had to, in order to catch up on the predestined entropy intended for those particular formations.

"What happened? Steel in the bridge went to blazes because of extreme age. It affected my car too, because the steel that formed the girl's table came from the same ores which later were used to make a bridge. But the parts of the bridge made from other ores were untouched. Everything suddenly became five hundred years old. Trees shot up to five hundred years of age—those trees which were direct descendants of the tree that had made the beech cradle. Gold vanished because in five hundred years it had changed its atomic form; leather vanished because it was made from the skin of animals whose

ancestors had provided the leather for the buckled straps. It worked through the whole line of descendants each time.

"Yes, even down to the silkworms," Clem finished. "They were the offsprings of the worms that had given the silk for Lucy's dress. Entropy caught up, right through the line again, evolved them five hundred years so that they vanished. Now, we hope, the trouble has achieved balance and the atomic set-ups are no longer a piece short in their normal progressive build-up."

"I believe," the Master said, after thinking for a long time, "that you are right. But you say the girl had a child? If that was so, her entropy surely would pass on through the child and all descendants, if any. Yet, nobody has been affected."

"Either the child died without ever marrying, or else this entropy shuffle takes time to reach higher matter," Clem answered. "Surely she gave off energy, same as anything else—"

He stopped, astounded, gripped Cardew's arm.

Something strange was happening to the Master!

His face changed by miraculous shadings into a mass of seams! He seemed to be unable to move, held in the grip of the astounding metabolism suddenly coursing through him. Heat seemed to spread from him as his life-energy took a mighty leap. With flashing seconds his iron gray hair went white; then he was bald.

His face caved in; the hands shrank to bony claws!

He spoke no word, but the last look in his masterful eyes was unforgettable. They were trying to understand: then they dimmed to burned out coals. His skinny frame flopped on the desk. Nor did it stay there. Unguessable age crumbled it to dust, and an empty suit of clothes fell to the floor.

"My God!" whispered Cardew, his jaw lolling stupidly.

Bradley stood fighting to control himself. Then the desk light went up. He pressed the button and listened to a city report.

"Emergency Communication! Unexpected senility sweeping the city! Severe within hundred miles radius. Isolated instances in remoter areas. Please advise."

"Later," Clem said, simulating the Master's voice; then he switched off the receiver and turned a rather scared face.

"Get it?" he asked.

"Like hell!" Cardew was sweating visibly.

"Entropy again. That child of Lucy's must have had several children after him. They married and had more. By now the number of original descendants of Lucy can run into thousands—and the Master was one of them! Remotely perhaps, but still a descendant. These others who are dying off are the same way. Five hundred years have caught up with them."

"We've got to get out!" Cardew panted. "We were alone with the Master. When he isn't seen again, the people will think—*Come on!*"

THEY got out of the building safely enough since it was presumed the Master had released them from audience, but by the time they had gotten back to their underground workings they were being harried with cries from the public loudspeakers proclaiming the mysterious disappearance of the Master. This was the chief news—but equally important was the record of ever-mounting senility sweeping the city.

With their short-wave radio down in the underground, Cardew, Clem and the girl heard every word—and the assembled engineers too. That they were loyal, knowing the true circumstances, was without doubt; but for the rest of the populace, Clem Bradley had no illusions.

Then somebody released the news that invasion from Venus was imminent. This, added to the senility scare, was the last straw. Invasion, and the Master dead!

"They'll get us for this!" Clem said grimly, two hours later. "No use kidding ourselves. We're right in a trap. The death—or rather disappearance—of the Master will convince everybody Lucy is a spy, particularly as invasion is coming. Only thing to do is fight it out. You boys willing?"

They nodded grimy faces, then started to assemble themselves for the onrush they knew was inevitable. It came in another half hour—not only guards, but armed civilians came tumbling down into the underground workings, shouting for vengeance.

"One move more," Cardew roared, standing with flame gun in each hand, "and I'll let you have it! We're not spies—nor is this girl! It's entropy—"

"To hell with the science!" jeered a voice. "Go for 'em! What are we waiting for?"

"We can never hold 'em!" Clem whispered—then all of a sudden a vast paralysis dropped on the crowd. Clem felt it too.

But he knew the cause—a quite material one. A paralysing wave for mob-quelling was at work. His eyes rose expectantly to the underground entrance as through it, to his surprise, came a heavily-clothed man in space kit. It was Leslie Hurst, Earth's Venusian ambassador.

"What's going on in here?" he demanded, striding forward and signaling the officers with him to keep the crowd under control. "Having a war because we've just missed a real one?"

His eyes became grim. "Yeah, I know the facts," he said. "I got most of them over my space radio—all about a girl creating sabotage. Venusian work. It struck me as odd because I've a personal check on all Venusian spies, and she didn't

fit in. I went straight to the Master the moment I got back, to give him special information. I found the place guarded, but no damned fool had had the sense to switch on the recorder button to see what had happened at the Master's last interview.

"I learned the truth," he went on, looking at Clem and Cardew. "Entropy! Entropy!" he yelled, staring at the crowd. "Five hundred years caught up with your relations; on wood, on steel— You will have the full story when you go home sensibly."

He signaled, and the paralysis lifted.

A voice shouted, "What did you come back for anyway? To invent this tale?"

"No. I came back from Venus in a hurry when a thousand of the best Venusian war chiefs died of old age and vanished! Invasion was thereby smashed to hell! Same thing again—entropy. Venusians are only Earth colonists, remem-

ber. Some of them were successors in multiple to this girl. Don't you understand? She's a heroine! She's saved us, not harmed us!"

Gradually the incredible truth began to sink in, and the mood changed. The ambassador stood grinning as the girl hurried for safety, this time to escape the eager praise. With Clem and Cardew she worked her way over to the ambassador.

"You don't know how close you came to missing us," Clem breathed. "I never thought of colonists, either."

"But it's true," Hurst said seriously. "And that set-up of the interview will clear you. I'll see to that."

"Just what," Lucy asked in bewilderment, "is this all about? How can I have successors when I'm not dead? I don't understand."

"You will," Clem promised her, smiling. "Even if it takes the rest of our lives to explain."