

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

VOL. XXXVI, No. 1

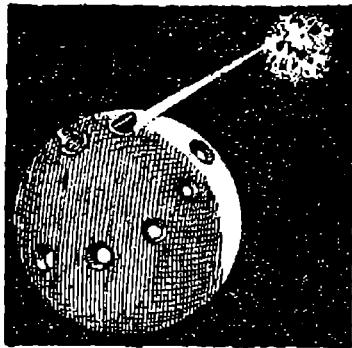
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

April, 1950

Featured Complete Novelet

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By MURRAY LEINSTER



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Published every other month by STANDARD MAGAZINES, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Copyright, 1950, by Standard Magazines, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.00, single copies, 25c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter October 8, 1946, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

THE TIME CAVE

By WALT SHELDON

*Tremayne was angry when
he discovered the
skeleton was
not a fossil—but
the man who went
with him had
another idea. . . .*



A skeleton was propped against the wall

I'VE only met one scientist who really matched the general public's idea of the breed. And at that he was perhaps a little more ruthless about it all than you'd expect a scientist to be. He ate, slept, walked, talked science—and he had been known to divorce wives and deny children on account of it.

It was Tremayne who took me to that cave in the Sandias near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Tremayne is not his real name of course—he still teaches at a Southwestern University. As we struggled up the cliffs he kept up a long dissertation on the essential desirability of the atom bomb.

"Of course thousands were killed, suffered. And it will happen to more. But, for Pete's sake, man, the thing lifts us out of barbarism. We're *really* on the way to knowing about the Universe, now!"

I found it difficult to answer him, because his rebuttal would always include

things like the speed of light and Kepler's law and quantum physics and what-not. Debate-wise, that stymied me. He was an anthropologist himself but he discussed anything from psychosomatic medicine to the use of garlic in salad dressing with tremendous assurance. And, for all I know, with knowledge.

We came upon a cave mouth presently and Tremayne said, "This is the place."

We were very high and on a ledge along the face of the cliff. We had parked the car far below at the crest of the long slope that rises eastward from Albuquerque and is called locally "the Mesa." We entered the cave-mouth, stooping to do so, Tremayne first. The passageway had room for one man at a time. It seemed to me to slope downward a bit.

"There's a complete skeleton in there," Tremayne was saying. For all his thin grayness he moved through the narrow passage with a kind of cat grace. "None of this arrowhead or potsherd stuff. He may be Sandia man himself for all I

know. There are some queer artifacts around him and I've got to study them further."

Tremayne had been to the cave once before and had discovered the skeleton. He had been tempted sorely to stay all night and study it, but had neither the food nor the water to do that and then find his way back safely.

Hunters and prospectors who tried such things had been hopelessly lost and never found among these Sandia cliffs and foothills—almost within sight of Albuquerque. I could easily see that this skeleton of his would give him an international reputation and clear up all the unknown things about Folsom and Sandia man and maybe a few others.

"Hope nobody else has been here since I have," he said as he moved on. "By heaven, if I found some fool climber or prospector trying to disturb that thing in there—I'd kill him."

He would, too. He'd do it and then point out how insignificant one human life was compared to the march of man's knowledge—one or a thousand.

THE dust rose in the cave then and choked us a bit. I turned and saw that by the light of the cavemouth behind us the dust was yellow. It made the light somehow semi-opaque—something of the effect you see in arty photographs of the Hungarian countryside. Very unreal, I felt. Then we made a turn and it became darker and Tremayne's flashlight shone, probing the way ahead of us.

Just a moment after that we passed through the thing I can't quite describe. Through it, or over it, or beyond it—whatever it was. As much as anything it was a *sensation*. It was like suddenly coming upon an unanticipated step in the dark—except that there wasn't really any step. The floor of the cave remained relatively smooth.

But I know this—we went through or over something.

"Did you feel that?" I asked Tremayne.

"Yes, I felt something," he said. He spoke impatiently. "An illusion, I sup-

pose, springing from anxiety. You feel the same sort of thing the first time you enter a coal mine, for instance. It seems you're plunging down, and down when you're really going level."

Tremayne always had a logical explanation for everything.

Then, abruptly, we were in a vault-like chamber, roughly the size of a small bedroom. A skeleton was partially propped against its opposite wall—staring at us. I had the feeling that it saw us, and quietly hated us—but then I'm just a University public relations man, not a scientist.

Tremayne unquestionably had no such feeling.

He walked right over to the skeleton and knelt beside it. "By heaven," he said, "we'll explode a lot of theories today."

He began to measure, using screw-adjusted calipers. He made notes. He worked very carefully and I could see that he was checking each operation several times. I sat down across from him and lighted a cigarette and watched. Around me, in the dust of the cave floor, there were scattered shards and arrowheads and implements and things and I examined some of these idly.

I could recognize the shape of most but one piece had me stumped. It was like a small automobile engine valve, except that it was made of stone. It could have been a two-inch model of a circular birdbath. At the end of the shaft a small hole had been drilled—as though it might be an ornament and the hole for a neck thong.

I was still glancing at this, wondering about it, when I heard Tremayne swear.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It doesn't make sense," he said. "It doesn't add up. I might have known it. And of all the filthy breaks—"

"You mean this isn't Sandia Man, or whatever?"

"Heck, no!" he said. "This one's cephalic index is seventy-five and the capacity almost one thousand five hundred c.c. The rest of the skeleton's the same way. I should have known from the arrowheads—they're much too modern. Better designed than Indian points even."

Although they're of stone—which is queer enough."

I frowned and asked, "Do you mean this skeleton isn't an old one?"

"Scientifically speaking," said Tremayne, "this man is just as modern as you and I. We've wasted the afternoon."

And perhaps we had.

But since I'm not a scientist—and not restricted to mere logic in my thinking—I've been able to develop a theory. I can't check it, since I can't find the cave again and Tremayne refuses to look a third time.

He won't even listen when I try to tell him about the little stone birdbath

thing I saw and suggest that its shape was that of a mushroom, the shape of Alamogordo and Bikini. He snorts when I say that the thing we went over or through in the passageway might have been a time fault, a kind of warp that took us into the future. He says I read too many science-fiction stories.

But I have my theory. The man whose skeleton we found—the one who presumably worshipped a bit of stone and hunted primitively with the bow and arrow and cooked in clay pots—he was—well, do you dare hear me say 't?

All right—*I think that man was your great-great-great-great grandson.*