

A Short Story

MIRACLES



RAY CUMMINGS

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TINY WINDOWS

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But how can you possibly know that time traveling has never been done?" the chemist protested. "Someone from our future may have gone into the past many times."

"I should think they'd have created quite a commotion," the lawyer observed. "Wouldn't we have heard of it from our historical records?"

"Of course." The chemist was smiling now. "We probably have. History tells of many important occasions on which a 'vision' appeared. A miraculous presence, such as Joan of Arc, for instance, or the Angel of Mons."

"Or the appearance of the Sun God to the Aztecs. I get your point," one of the other men interjected. "You think that there might have been a time traveler who materialized just long enough to take a look—and the superstitious natives took him for a god. Why not? That's probably just what would happen."

Young Alan Dane sat in a corner of his grandfather's laboratory, listening to the argument of the group of men. He was well over six feet in height, a sun-bronzed, crisply blond young Viking. Beside him sat Ruth Vincent, his fiancée, a slim girl of twenty. Alan's heart was pounding. Somehow it seemed as though this bantering talk of time traveling were something momentous to him, something requiring a great and irrevocable decision.

Then abruptly old Professor Dane held up his hand and, quite casually, said, "What you do not know, gentlemen, is that for half my life I have been working to discover the secret of time travel."

His audience was suddenly tense. Professor Dane was loved and respected by each of them, and his word in his chosen field of physics was final. If he said a thing could be done there was no mistake.

The chemist broke the silence. "You've succeeded?" he asked. "You've made experiments that show—"

The old man shook his head. "No, not yet. But I'm close to it. I know I am." He was staring at some infinitely distant thing beyond the room in which they were sitting. Staring as though he were trying to penetrate the grim curtain of the future, or the past.

Almost as though to himself, he went on, "I've often wondered what made me work on this thing all these years. It's been like an inner urge driving me, a preordained destiny that is making me accomplish something."

"Metaphysics!" the lawyer interrupted. "Do you believe in predestination?"

"I believe there is a plan," Professor Dane said simply. "But what it is, and what my part in it may be ... I don't know. That's the queer part. I know instinctively that I must do something, something connected with traveling through time. Some task I must accomplish. But what it is, and how I am to do it ... I don't know. Yet I feel that if the moment came, I would know what to do." He was gently smiling now at Alan and his fiancée. "But perhaps I am too old—I have thought that is true," he continued. "So I sent for my grandson. And, as you see, he brought his fiancée here with him."

The old professor was staring at the startled Ruth now. "And, gentlemen," he added earnestly, "meeting her has somehow seemed to intensify that feeling. There is something to be accomplished, in the past or the future, and it concerns Ruth Vincent!"

Alan's hands were gripping the arms of his chair. These things which his grandfather had been feeling—he was feeling them now. This urge, this apprehension that something was left undone....

"I'm going to ask Alan now to carry on for me," his grandfather finished abruptly. "He is young and strong, educated and able. I want him to feel the things I've been feeling—"

"Oh, I do!" Alan exclaimed. "I'll do what I can, grandfather. I'd have to do it, even if I didn't want to! Don't you see—I feel that same urge!"

The gray moving shadows all around Alan Dane were blurred, formless. He was seated hunched on what had been the ground. It was the ground no longer, but now an undulant gray surface that was under him, supporting his weight, but imperceptible to his touch. He couldn't feel it; he couldn't feel anything but the racking strain of his headlong drive through the vast infinities of time.

He alone, of all things in this great gray monochrome of scene, seemed substantial. Everything else flowed invisibly away into emptiness. The

thin skeleton of the metal headgear clamped on his forehead so that his temples throbbed; the wires to his wrists and ankles were luminous glowing strands. The electroidal current from the batteries lashed across his back was throbbing and pulsing into every fiber of his tingling body.

Alan shifted restlessly and glanced at the little time-dial on his wrist. The needle was creeping slowly back, showing a hurtling progression through time to the past. He closed his strained eyes, glad of the relief from the impossible attempt to focus his gaze on the weirdly distorted scene before him.

Where should he stop? And what would he find?

Alan's imagination went back to the scene when his grandfather had first told others of his fantastic creation that would permit voyaging through the years. What had the old man said then? Something about a purpose—

Alan was almost on fire with the consciousness of that set purpose now. Something within him, something that could not be denied, was guiding his hand on the control switch of the time traveler.

He was voyaging backward into time! So strange a thing—and so simple in fundamental conception. He recalled how his grandfather had explained it, back in the laboratory. Everything had been created at once. On the scroll of time everything is permanent. We live our infinitesimal lifetime progressing forward through ordained, predetermined events. All the past and all the future exist—but we can only be aware of that forward-moving instant which we call the present.

And old Professor Dane's fundamental conception—certainly it could now be considered finally proven, with his grandson actually applying it to really travel through time. He had thought that all material things, strewn in sequence on the scroll of time, were of different physical characteristics.

Different states of matter; a different vibration-rate, so that to change the vibratory frequency of any object would be to change its position on the time-scroll!

Alan had started from his grandfather's laboratory, near Riverside Drive in mid-town New York. The date had been May of 1942. His watch, set above the other time-recording instrument on his wrist, told him that his start had been made only a scant half hour before, by his

personal consciousness of time. How long ago—how far away that seemed now! There had been a reeling of his senses, the soundless clapping of swiftly alternating light and darkness at the shadowy laboratory windows. Then as his rate of change accelerated, the days and nights had merged into this flat, dead emptiness of gray.

Then the house had abruptly dwindled, thinned out, and disappeared from around him! He had reached a time-era before its construction. Still with greater speed, the shadowy shifting outlines of the great city were in motion, shrinking into smaller and smaller buildings, narrower, shorter roads.

More shadowy open spaces appeared, then were replaced by towering giants of trees. 1850 he reached and passed—then 1800, and 1750. The city had been long gone by then—the little village of British New York was a shrunken settlement of a few thousand persons clustered down about the Battery, four miles from where Alan Dane was. He could see that he was poised now on what seemed a little wooded hill, sloping down to the broad Hudson River a few hundred feet away.

It was a strange transition indeed. And yet to Alan Dane, the strangeness of his own emotions seemed not the least of it. Three years of his life had passed since that night when he had promised his grandfather he would carry on the experiments—three years in which he had lost his grandfather, but gained a wife and son. Ruth Vincent had married him and together they had worked on the fragile thing that he bore now on his back—fragile, but more potent in a strange, incredible way than any other device.

Alone Alan would have failed. Even with Ruth helping him he could not have hoped to succeed so soon. But his grandfather had left researches only a hair's-breadth from completion ... and the young couple had finished them.

Even so, the thing had come almost by accident. Alan was far from sure that he could again compound the strange, unstable mixture of rare chemicals from which his nameless alloys were made—alloys which formed the plates in the time-batteries. But at least he had enough for this one brief trip.

Alan was curiously sure that this one trip was all he needed to make—that, after it was done, the curious driving compulsion that had seized him three years before would leave him, his task completed.

Alan glanced again at the time-dial. The transition was slowing now; he had hardly been aware that a moment ago he had decreased the current. 1699-98-97.... The retardation was progressive. It was almost as though the apparatus itself were dictating his stopping point.

And then the date 1650 flashed into his mind. That was when he had to stop. It was as though he'd always known it....

Was this a cave, here at his back? He was aware that he was sitting at its entrance, facing the shadowy declivity and the deep woods through which he could see the broad, gray river.

An instant later he shoved the lever to shut off the current. The shock of the halt made his senses swoop. Then, as he steadied, with the ground solid under him, he was aware that it was night. The hum of the throbbing electroidal current was gone. But there was still a pulsing note in the air—the throbbing voice of the deep forest through which the river was shimmering, pallid in the moonlight.

Alan staggered to his feet, steadied himself. A shaft of moonlight was on him; and abruptly in the dimness of the cave he heard a sound. A man's muttered, astonished exclamation blended with the startled high gasp of a girl.

As he turned, he saw them. The man was hardly more than a boy—twenty, perhaps, and garbed curiously in gray blouse and brown, baggy pantaloons, knitted brown stockings and thick, clumsy shoes. The girl was even younger, a slim little thing in a quaint bodiced dress with her braided flaxen hair tumbling forward over her shoulders in double strands.

Terrified, wide-eyed with utter astonishment, they mutely gaped at Alan.

"Well," he said at last. "Do you speak English? I'm sorry I don't speak Dutch—that's your language, isn't it? This is Dutch New Amsterdam?" He checked himself and sighed. The Dutch boy and girl were gulping, numbly staring at him. They didn't speak English, of course. It would have been too much of a coincidence ... but so welcome, if they had. "I'm sorry," Alan went on, not hopefully. "Look here, I don't want to frighten you. I only want to know—"

He took a step forward. For a second the two looked utterly incredulous, as though disbelieving the evidence of their eyes. And then they shrank

away with terror on their white faces. The youth whirled the girl behind him, confronted Alan.

"What—what do you want?" he faltered. It was English, curiously and quaintly intoned. "Are you real? Where do you come from?" The lad was recovering rapidly. "You speak English, but not like the traders or my teacher. What are you?"

Alan tried to smile. "I won't hurt you," he repeated. "I'm a friend. A visitor, from—from a far-off place," he floundered. It would never do to say that he came from 1942. Already they were staring at him as though he were mad, huddled back against the wall of the cave.

Abruptly behind Alan there was a whiz; a thud; and the cave was lighted by a flickering, yellow-red glare. It made the youth momentarily overlook his astonishment, his terror at Alan, so that he gasped to the girl:

"Oh, Greta—a fire-arrow! They are out there just as we feared."

Alan turned. An Indian fire-arrow had whizzed into the cave-mouth from the forest outside. It quivered, sticking upright in the guano floor of the cave—a little torch of flame with thick, resinous smoke surging up from it. With a sidewise kick Alan's foot knocked it loose and he trampled on it. He swung around with a leap so that he was close to his cowering companions.

"Indians are out there?" he demanded. "Is that what you were afraid of, before you saw me?"

The girl was coughing with the drifting smoke already choking her a little in the fetid air of the cave.

"Yes," the lad muttered. "That is it. They saw us in the woods as we came up from the Bouwerij. So we ran in here."

Another arrow came flaming. It barely missed Alan, struck against the rockwall and fell nearby, still flaming. He and the lad rushed at it; they stamped it out together.

"You have no guns?" Alan demanded.

"Guns?"

"To shoot with. To fight our way out of here."

"Oh, not guns on a ship—you mean fowling pieces? No, we have none." Despite his terror at the flaming arrows of the Indians outside the cave, the frightened Dutch boy was forcing himself to answer Alan's questions, but still both he and the girl were incredulously staring at their miraculously appearing companion.

"Greta was showing me the way up from the town," the Dutch boy was murmuring. "She has a boat at the river bank. Then I was going up with the tide. In the fog last night, an English frigate got past our forts at the Bowling Green. It is up the river now, and Stuyvesant has sent me—"

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Under Alan's urging questions, the boy and girl swiftly explained. This was a Dutch boy, born here in Nieuw Amsterdam, but he had lived most of his life in London. His name was Peter Van Saant. She was Greta Dykeman; her father was one of Governor Stuyvesant's burghers of the Town Council. The English fleet was here off the Hook, and yesterday, Nichols, emissary of the Duke of York, had come ashore to demand that the Dutch surrender the city. Henceforth, according to the demands of the Duke, this would not be Nieuw Amsterdam, but New York—a British settlement with a destiny of greatness, here in the New World.

As he mutely listened, Alan's mind again swept to his own time-world of 1942. This same space! And he envisioned the huge city of 1942, when this cave and forested glade were mid-Manhattan, where giant buildings towered and the great ramp of the automobile highway bordered the river.

Another flaming arrow came whizzing into the mouth of the cave. Peter rushed for it, stamped it out. The woods beyond the cave-mouth now were lighted with torch glare, and echoing with the warwhoops of the Indians, emboldened because no fowling pieces of the trapped palefaces were exploding to hurl lead at them. Outside the cave, arrows were continuously striking; the brush was on fire, with a red-yellow glare that came in here and painted Alan and his two confused, terrified companions with its lurid sheen.

"I've got to get up the river to that frigate," the lad was muttering. "If I got killed here—or even Greta got killed—what matter? But I've got to reach the frigate."

He was a secret emissary of Stuyvesant, this momentous night—sent to the English commander of the frigate—sent because he spoke English so well and they would trust him.

"Stuyvesant will yield to the Duke of York in a day or two," Peter was swiftly saying. "But he is afraid the frigate's men will land and attack the city from the north. If they do that, Stuyvesant's prestige before his own people will make him fight. Without it, he will try to drive a bargain for his own self-respect, and then yield. I am to tell the frigate's commander that if only he will but have patience and wait—Stuyvesant will surrender."

Upon that mission, tonight, might depend the whole course of history in the New World!

"There's no back way out of here?" Alan demanded.

"No. Just this one entrance. And if we should try to run, out there into that glare—"

"We'd get arrows in us," Alan finished wryly. "Those Indians are pretty close now."

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The shouts of the savages were audible, where they crouched in the brush just beyond the line of fire. They were whooping with anticipatory triumph and showering the cave-mouth with their flaming missiles. Acrid yellow smoke was welling into the cave in clouds. Peter had shoved Greta to the floor where the air, so far, was a little purer. He too was coughing; and Alan felt the clutch of the resin-smoke in his own throat. To stay here another five or ten minutes would be death.

If only his time-traveling mechanism would take more than one person! But it would not. He himself was safe, of course.... He had taken a step toward the cave-mouth, and abruptly he recoiled as an arrow whizzed narrowly past his shoulder.

Nothing safe about this!

And then he knew what he must try to do. "You two stay here, just a few minutes," he said swiftly. "Keep down by the floor, both of you—air's still much better down there. I'm going away, but I'll be back."

He gazed down at them from his stalwart, six foot height as they crouched terrified at his feet. He was smiling a little as his fingers shoved the lever of the time-mechanism on his chest to the first stop.

He could see the astonished horror and awe on their faces as slowly he faded, vanished before them.

A little movement forward in time. Just about twenty-four hours. The blurred and shadowy cave briefly was filled with daylight, and then with the darkness of night again.

Alan switched off the current. Night was here, deep and silent, enshrouding the forest. No warwhoops; no glare of flaming arrows and burning brush. That had been last night. From the empty cave Alan walked slowly out into the woods. A northward vista of the broad river for a moment was visible. A little blob was out there in the river—an English frigate awaiting the outcome of the parley of Nichols, emissary of the Duke of York, with Governor Stuyvesant.

Alan selected a flat-topped rock which stood about a hundred feet off to one side of the cave-mouth—a rock whose top was some twenty feet above the surrounding rocks and thickets. He climbed it; stood on its summit.

If only this would work! Despite his efforts at calmness, he was shuddering inside. Not for his own safety—was it for his wife and their little son, out there in 1942? Absurd thought; but somehow it was turning him cold with apprehension.

He set his tiny time-dial for the moment of his departure from the smoke-filled cave, last night, and turned the current on again. Twenty-four hours backward into time. A retrogression of that same swift daylight again. Then the previous dawn, swiftly fading into night....

Again his time-movement stopped; and the forest sprang into ringing warwhoops and crackling yellow-red glare of torchlight and burning brush. On the top of the little butte Alan stood poised. An amazing figure, he came out of nothingness, solidifying before the astounded eyes of the stricken savages. The warwhoops died into a tense, terrified silence. To Alan it was a breathless moment of apprehension. His fingers went to the time-lever; alert to shove it if necessary. And then in the wave of silence which flooded the pallid forest glade he flung out his arms. Drawn to his full height, with arms outstretched as though in benediction he stood gazing down upon the silent savages. A pale cathedral shaft of moonlight

was filtering through the overhead branches and it struck upon him, illuminated him with its eerie glow.

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The tense moment passed. The Indians, their war-painted bodies glistening in the glare of the burning brush, were all silently staring. There seemed a hundred or more of them. Then one of them, with a faint awed cry, flung himself prostrate with forehead to the ground in terrified homage to this shining god of the rock who had appeared so suddenly.

And then they were all prostrate in groveling worship until one of them, who might have been their leader, abruptly leaped to his feet and dashed away through the thickets. The others in another second were up after him. It was a frightened scramble, a terrified rush to escape the wrath of this stalwart god who so silently was poised above them in the forest.

For a moment the woods resounded with the cries and the tramp of the escaping savages; distant cries until at last there was only silence....

Alan leaped from the rock and dashed for the burning brush outside the cave-mouth. If only he had calculated his time correctly! Then at the cave entrance Greta and Peter appeared. His arm held her as she sagged against him, with the yellow-red glare painting them and the turgid smoke swirling around them.

"Here—I'll carry her," Alan exclaimed.

He caught the girl up in his arms—slim, frail little thing, fighting in terror with him for an instant, and then relaxing. Peter staggered after them as Alan led the way down into the silent forest where the night air was pure and all the fire and smoke were above them with the silent shimmering river gleaming there ahead.

"You're better now?" he murmured to the girl.

"Yes. Oh yes—I'm all right. Oh, who—what are you?"

He did not answer. Holding her in his arms suddenly made him think of Ruth, out there waiting for him in 1942. And a new apprehension struck at him—would his time-current last to get him back home? He was not using it now, but still, he knew, the volatile chemicals in the batteries were subject to evaporation.

He set little Greta on her feet. "Your boat is near here?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes, right here at the bank."

"Well, you find it for Peter. Start him up for the frigate, and then you get back home."

"Yes, I will. It is not far to the north stockade."

They were both staring at him, confused, numbed with awe. "I—we must thank you," Peter muttered. "We saw the Indians as they fled."

"Oh, that's all right. Glad to do it. But I've got to get—away now. I've got to get back where—where I came from—"

Then Greta took a step toward him.

"Oh, please, who—what are you? This thing you have done for us—"

Alan was gently smiling. "Hard to explain. You'd better just call it a miracle," he said. His finger pressed the time-lever. He could see Peter grip the girl as they shrank away with terror, staring at him while slowly he faded into nothingness....

May, 1942. In a dim, quiet room of the New York Historical Society Alan sat poring over an old Dutch chronicle of Nieuw Amsterdam. And then he found what he was after—an account of Stuyvesant's surrender to the Duke of York. It was a modern English translation of an account by someone who had lived in the little Dutch city.

Alan read it, awed. Here was mention of young Peter Van Saant, who had gone up the river to the Queen Catherine—the English frigate which had slipped past the forts in the fog that night. And it told of Greta Dykeman who had shown him the way to where her rowboat was hidden. And then—the miracle!

Greta Dykeman and Peter Van Saant—so the chronicle stated—had been attacked by Indians that night. They had taken refuge in a cave, where a great shining presence in the guise of a strange man had come and frightened away the Indians. He had led Peter and Greta to safety—and then had vanished.

Silently Alan left the Historical Society. Why had it seemingly been his destiny to rescue that Dutch boy and girl? That strange urge which both he and his grandfather before him had felt so strongly—why was that?

Van Saant—why, that suggested the name Vincent! The one, Dutch—and the other just its English, modernized equivalent?

Alan hurried to the Genealogical Room at the Public Library; and there he found it. Ruth's family—the Vincents—and before that, the Van Saants.

Then he came to 1656. The marriage of Peter Van Saant, to Mistress Greta Dykeman....

Alan sat numbly, staring in awe.

If they had died in that smoke-filled cave, this son of theirs, recorded here as Hans Van Saant, born 1657, would never have been born, nor any of his descendants. No Ruth Vincent, now in 1942; no little son of hers and Alan's....

Alan was smiling to himself, a whimsical, awed smile. He certainly had had no cause to be apprehensive that his mission back into time would fail. It was ordained—predestined—a million events down from Peter and Greta to Ruth were recorded, with his own action fitting into them. Nothing else was possible!

Miracle ... there is so much that none of us will ever understand!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ray Cummings (August 30, 1887 – January 23, 1957) was an American author of science fiction literature and comic books. Cummings was born in New York City in 1887. He worked with Thomas Edison as a personal assistant and technical writer from 1914 to 1919.

Cummings is identified as one of the "founding fathers" of the science fiction genre. His most highly regarded fictional work was the novel *The Girl in the Golden Atom* published in 1922, which was a consolidation of a short story by the same name published in 1919 (where Cummings combined the idea of Fitz James O'Brien's *The Diamond Lens* with H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*) and a sequel, *The People of the Golden Atom*, published in 1920.



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