

THE GIRL WHO MADE TIME STOP

LITTLE DID Roger Thompson dream when he sat down on the park bench that Friday morning in June that in a celibate sense his goose was already in the oven and that soon it would be cooked. He may have had an inkling of things to come when he saw the tall brunette in the red sheath walking down the winding walk some several minutes later, but that inkling could not conceivably have apprised him of the vast convolutions of time and space which the bowing out of his bachelorhood would shortly set in motion.

The tall brunette was opposite the bench, and it was beginning to look as though Roger's goose was in no imminent danger of being roasted after all when one of those incidents that so much inspire our boy-meets-girl literature occurred: one of her spike heels sank into a crevice in the walk and brought her to an abrupt halt. Our hero rose to the occasion admirably—especially in view of the fact that he was in the midst of a brown study concerning a particularly abstruse phase of the poetic analysis of science which he was working on and was even less aware of girls than usual. In a millisecond he was at her side; in another he had slipped his arm around her waist. He freed her foot from the shoe, noticing as he did so that there were three narrow golden bands encircling her bare leg just above her ankle, and helped her over to the bench. "I'll have it out of there in a jiffy," he said.

He was as good as his word, and seconds later he slipped the shoe back upon the girl's dainty foot. "Oh, thank you, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ." she began.

Her voice was husky, her face was oval; her lips were red and full. Looking into the pearly depths of her gray eyes, he had the feeling that he was falling—as in a sense he was—and he sat dizzily down beside her. "Thompson," he said. "Roger Thompson."

The pearly depths grew deeper still. "I'm glad to meet you, Roger. My name is Becky Fisher."

"I'm glad to meet you, Becky."

So far, so good. Boy has met girl, and girl has met boy. Boy is suitably smitten; girl is amenable. Both are young. The month is June. A romance is virtually bound to blossom, and soon a romance does. Nevertheless it is a romance that will never be recorded in the annals of time.

Why not? you ask.

You'll see.

They spent the rest of the day together. It was Becky's day off from the Silver Spoon, where she waited on tables. Roger, who was sweating out the sixth application he had tendered since graduating from the Lakeport Institute of Technology, had every day off for the moment. That evening they dined in a modest café, and afterward they played the jukebox and danced. The midnight moment upon the steps of the apartment house where Becky lived was a precious one, and their first kiss was so sweet and lingering on Roger's lips that he did not even wonder, until he reached his hotel room, how a young man such as himself—who saw love as an impediment to a scientific career—could have fallen so deeply into it in so short a span of time.

In his mind's eye the bench in the park had already taken on the aspect of a shrine, and the very next morning saw him walking down the winding walk, eager to view the sacred object once again. Consider his chagrin when he rounded the last curve and saw a girl in a blue dress sitting on the very section of the hallowed object that his goddess had consecrated the most!

He sat down as far away from her as the length of the bench permitted. Perhaps if she had been glamorous he wouldn't have minded so much. But she wasn't. Her face was too thin, and her legs were too long. Compared with the red dress Becky had worn, hers was a lackluster rag, and as for her feather-cut titian hair, it was an insult to cosmetology.

She was writing something in a little red notebook and didn't appear to notice him at first. Presently, however, she glanced at her wrist watch, and then—as though the time of day had somehow apprised her of his presence—she looked in his direction.

It was a rather mild—if startled—look, and did not in the least deserve the dirty one he squelched it

with. He had a glimpse, just before she hastily returned her attention to her notebook, of a dusting of golden freckles, a pair of eyes the hue of bluebirds and a small mouth the color of sumac leaves after the first hard frost. He wondered idly if his initial reaction to her might not have been different if he had used a less consummate creature than Becky for a criterion.

Suddenly he became aware that she was looking at him again. "How do you spell matrimony?" she asked.

He gave a start "Matrimony?"

"Yex. How do you spell it?"

"M-a-t-r-i-m-o-n-y," Roger said.

"Thankx." She made a correction in her notebook, then she turned toward him again. "I'm a very poor speller—especially when it comes to foreign words."

"Oh, you're from another country, then?" That would explain her bizarre accent.

"Yex, from Buzenborg. It's a xsmall provinxe on the xouthernmoxt continent of the sixth planet of the star you call Altair. I juxt arrived on earth this morning."

From the matter-of-fact way she said it, you'd have thought that the southernmost continent of Altair VI was no more remote from Lakeport than the southernmost continent of Sol III and that spaceships were as common as automobiles. Small wonder that the scientist in Roger was incensed. Small wonder that he girded himself immediately to do battle.

His best bet, he decided, would be a questions-and-answers campaign designed to lure her into deeper and deeper water until finally she went under. "What's your name?" he began casually.

"Alayne. What'x yourx?"

He told her. Then: "Don't you have a surname?"

"No. In Buzenborg we dixpenxed with xurnamex centuries ago."

He let that go by. "All right, then, where's your spaceship?"

"I parked it by a barn on a dexerted farm a few milex outside the xity. With the force field turned on, it lookx xomething like a xilo. People never notixex an obvious object, even if it' x right under their noxex, xo long ax it blends in with its xurroundings."

"A silo?"

"Yex. A—a silo. I see I've been getting my 'X's' mixed up with my 'S's' again. You see," she went on, pronouncing each word carefully, "in the Buzenborg alphabet the nearest sound to the 'S' sound is the 'X' sound, so if I don't watch myself, whenever I say 'S' it comes out 'X,' unless it is followed or preceded by a letter that softens its sibilance."

Roger looked at her closely. But her blue eyes were disarming, and not so much as a smidgin of a smile disturbed the serene line of her lips. He decided to humor her. "What you need is a good diction teacher," he said.

She nodded solemnly. "But how do I go about getting one?"

"The phone directory is full of them. Just call one up and make an appointment." Probably, he thought cynically, if he had met her before Becky swam into his ken he would have thought her accent charming and have advised her not to go to a diction teacher. "But lees get back to what we were talking about," he went on. "You say you left your ship in plain sight because people never notice an obvious object so long as it doesn't clash with its surroundings, which means that you want to keep your presence on Earth a secret. Right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then why," Roger pounced, "are you sitting here in broad daylight practically throwing the secret in my face?"

"Because the law of obviousness works with people too. The surest way to make everybody believe I'm not from Altair VI is to keep saying that I am."

"O.K., we'll let that pass." Eagerly Roger launched Phase Two of his campaign. "Let's consider your trip instead."

Inwardly he gloated. He was sure he had her now. However, as matters turned out, he didn't have her at all, for in drawing up his plans to lure her into deeper and deeper water he had overlooked a very

pertinent possibility—the possibility that she might be able to swim. And not only could she swim, she was even more at home in the scientific sea than he was.

For instance, when he pointed out that, owing to the ratio between the mass and the velocity of a moving body, the speed of light cannot be equaled and that therefore her journey from Altair VI to Earth must have required more than the sixteen years needed by light to travel the same distance, she said, "You're not taking the Lorentz transformation into consideration. Moving clocks slow down with reference to stationary clocks, so if I traveled at just under the velocity of light my journey wouldn't have lasted over a few hours."

For instance, when he pointed out that more than sixteen years would still have gone by on Altair VI, and that her family and friends would be that much older, she said, "Yes, but you're only assuming that the speed of light can't be equaled. As a matter of fact, it can be doubled, tripled and quadrupled. True, the mass of a moving body increases in proportion to its velocity, but not when a demassifier—a device invented by our scientists to cancel out mass—is used."

For instance, when he conceded for the sake of argument that the velocity of light could be exceeded and pointed out that if she had traveled a little in excess of twice its velocity she not only would have traveled backward in time but would have finished her journey before she began it, thereby giving birth to a rather awkward paradox, she said, "There wouldn't be a paradox because the minute one became imminent a cosmic time shift would cancel it. Anyway, we don't use faster-than-light drives any more. We used to, and our ships are still equipped with them, but we aren't supposed to resort to them except in cases of emergency because too many time shifts occurring simultaneously could disrupt the space-time continuum."

And for instance, when he demanded how she *had* made her trip then, she said, "I took the short cut, the same as anyone else on Altair VI does when he wishes to travel vast distances. Space is warped, just as your own scientists have theorized, and with the new warp drive our Altairian VI scientists have developed it's no trick at all, even for an amateur to travel to any place he wants to in the galaxy in a matter of just a few days."

It was a classic dodge, but dodge or not, it was still unassailable. Roger stood up. He knew when he was beaten. "Well, don't take any wooden meteorites," he said.

"Where—where are you going, Roger?"

"To a certain tavern I know of for a sandwich and a beer, after which I'm going to watch the New York—Chicago game on TV."

"But—but aren't you going to ask me to come with you?"

"Of course not. Why should I?"

A transformation Lorentz had never dreamed of took place in her eyes, leaving them a misted and an incredulous blue. Abruptly she lowered them to her wrist watch. I—I can't understand it. My wogget registers ninety, and even eighty is considered a high-compatibility reading."

A tear the size of a large dewdrop rolled down her cheek and fell with a soundless splash upon her blue bodice. The scientist in Roger was unmoved, but the poet in him was touched. "Oh, all right, come along if you want to," he said.

The tavern was just off Main Street. After phoning a diction teacher at the request of Alayne of Altair and making an appointment for her for four-thirty that afternoon, he chose a booth that afforded an unobstructed view of the TV screen and ordered two roast beefs on *kummelweck* and two glasses of beer.

Alayne of Altair's sandwich disappeared as fast as his did. "Like another one?" he asked.

"No, thanks. Though the beef was really quite tasty considering the low chlorophyllic content of Earth grass."

"So you've got better grass than we have. I suppose you've got better cars and better TV sets too!"

"No, they're about the same. Except for its phenomenal advance in space travel, our technology is practically parallel with yours."

"How about baseball? Do you have that too?"

"What's baseball?" Alayne of Altair wanted to know.

"You'll see," said Roger of Earth gloatingly. Pretending to be from Altair VI was one thing, but pretending to be ignorant of baseball was quite another. She was bound to betray herself by at least one slip of the tongue before the afternoon was very much older.

However, she did nothing of the sort. As a matter of fact, her reactions strengthened rather than weakened her claim to extraterrestrialism. "Why do they keep shouting, 'Go, go, go, Aparicio?'" she asked during the bottom half of the fourth.

"Because Aparicio is famous for his base stealing. Watch him now—he's going to try to steal second."

Aparicio not only tried, he made it too. "See?" Roger said.

It was clear from the befuddled expression on Alayne of Altair's face that she did not see. "It doesn't make any sense," she said. "If he's so good at stealing bases, why didn't he steal first base instead of standing there swinging at that silly sphere?"

Roger gaped at her. "Look, you're not getting this at all. You can't steal *first* base."

"But suppose somebody did steal it. Would they let him stay there?"

"But you can't steal first base. It's impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible," Alayne of Altair said.

Disgusted, Roger let it go at that, and throughout the rest of the game he ignored her. However, he was a White Sox fan, and when his idols came through with a 5-4 win his disgust dissipated like mist on a summer morning, and so great was his euphoria that he told her he'd walk uptown with her to the diction teacher's studio. On the way he talked about his poetic analysis of science, and he even quoted a few lines from a Petrarchan sonnet he had done on the atom. Her warm enthusiasm sent his euphoria soaring even higher. "I hope you had a pleasant afternoon," he said when they paused in front of the building in which the diction teacher's studio was located.

"Oh, I did!" Excitedly she wrote something down in her notebook, tore out the page and handed it to him. "My Earth address," she explained. "What time are you going to call for me tonight, Rog?"

Abruptly his euphoria vanished. "Whatever gave you the idea we had a date for tonight?"

"I—I took it for granted. According to my wodget—"

"Stop!" Roger said. "I've had all I can take for one day of wodgets and demassifiers and faster-than-light drives. Besides, it just so happens that I've got a date for tonight, and it also just so happens that the girl I've got the date with is the girl I've been unconsciously searching for all my life and didn't find till yesterday morning, and . . ."

He paused. Sudden sadness had roiled the blue depths of Alayne of Altair's eyes, and her mouth was quivering like a frost-kissed sumac leaf in a November wind. "I—I understand now," she said. "Wodgets react to compatibility of body chemistry and intellectual proclivities. They aren't sensitive enough to detect superficial emotional attachments. I—I guess I came a day too late."

"You can't prove it by me. Well, give my regards to the Buzenborgians."

"Will—will you be in the park tomorrow morning?"

He opened his mouth to deliver an emphatic no—and saw the second tear. It was even larger than the first one had been and glimmered like a transparent pearl in the corner of her left eye. "I suppose so," he said resignedly.

"I'll be waiting for you on the bench."

He killed three hours in a movie house and picked up Becky at her apartment at seven-thirty. She was wearing a black sheath that made her shape shout, and a pair of pointed shoes with metal tips that matched the three golden bands around her ankle. He took one look into her gray eyes and knew then and there that he was going to propose to her before the evening ended.

They dined in the same cafe. When they were halfway through their meal, Alayne of Altair walked in the door on the arm of a sartorially elegant young man with a lean, hungry face and a long bushy tail. Roger nearly fell out of his chair.

She spotted him right away and brought her escort over to the table. "Roger, this is Ashley Ames," she said excitedly. "He invited me out to dinner so he could continue my diction lesson. Afterward he's going to take me to his apartment and show me his first edition of *Pygmalion*." She got her eyes on

Becky then and gave a start. Abruptly her gaze traveled floorward to where Becky's trim ankles were visible just beneath the tablecloth, and when she raised her eyes again they had transmuted from blue to green. "Three down and one to go," she said. "I should have known it would be one of *you*!"

Becky's eyes had undergone a metamorphosis too. They were yellow now instead of gray. "I saw him first, and you know the rules as well as I do. So lay off!"

"Come on," Alayne of Altair said haughtily to Ashley Ames, who was hovering predatorily just behind her. "There must be better restaurants on Earth than this!"

Bewildered, Roger watched them leave. All he could think of was Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf. "Do you know her?" he asked Becky.

"She's a real gone crackpot with an outer-space complex who comes in the Silver Spoon sometimes and babbles about life on other planets. Let's change the subject, shall we?"

Roger did so. Dinner over, he took Becky to a show, and afterward he suggested a walk in the park. She squeezed his arm in an eloquent answer. The sacred bench stood like an island in a tam of purest moonlight, and they waded through the silvery shallows to its iron-wrought shores and sat down upon its shelving hills. Her second kiss made the first seem sisterly, and when it was over Roger knew he would never be the same again. "Will you marry me, Becky?" he blurted.

She didn't seem particularly surprised. "Do you really want me to?"

"I'll say! Just as soon as I get a job and—"

"Kiss me, Roger."

He didn't get back to the subject till they were standing on her apartment-house steps. "Why, of course I'll marry you, Roger," she said. "Tomorrow we'll take a drive into the country and make plans."

"Fine! I'll rent a car, and we'll take a lunch and—"

"Never mind a lunch. Just pick me up at two." She kissed him so hard that his toes turned up. "Good night, Roger."

"See you tomorrow at two," he said when his breath came back.

"Maybe I'll ask you in for a cocktail."

His feet never touched the ground once all the way back to the hotel. He came back down to earth with a jar, though, when he read the letter the night clerk handed him. The wording was different from that of the five others he had received in answer to his five other applications, but the essential message was the same: "Don't call us, we'll call you."

He went upstairs sadly and undressed and got into bed. After five failures in a row he should have known better than to tell the sixth interviewer about his poetic analysis of science. Modern industrial corporations wanted men with hard unadorned facts in their heads, not frustrated poets seeking symmetry in the microcosm. But, as usual, his enthusiasm had carried him away.

It was a long time before he fell asleep. When he finally did so he dreamed a long and involved dream about a girl in an Alice-blue gown, a wolf in a Brooks Brothers suit and a siren in a black sheath.

True to her word, Alayne of Altair was sitting on the bench when he came down the walk the next morning. "Hi, Rog," she said brightly.

He sat glumly down beside her. "How was Ashley's first edition?"

"I didn't see it yet. Last night after we had dinner I was so tired I told him to take me straight home. He's going to show it to me tonight. We're going to dine by candlelight in his apartment." She hesitated for a moment—then, with a rush: "She's not the one for you, Rog. Becky, I mean."

He sat up straight on the bench. "What makes you think so?"

"I—I tracked you last night on my fleglinder. It's a little TV receiver that you beam in on whoever you want to see and hear. Last—last night I beamed it in on you and Becky."

"You followed us, you mean! Why, you snooping little—"

"Please don't get mad at me, Roger. I was worried about you. Oh, Rog, you've fallen into the clutches of a witch-woman from Muggenwort!"

It was too much. He stood up to leave, but she grabbed his arm and pulled him back down again. "Now you listen to me, Rog," she went on. "This is serious. I don't know what she told you about me, but whatever it was, it's a lie. Girls from Muggenwort are mean and cruel and crafty and will do anything to

further their evil ends. They come to Earth in spaceships just as we girls from Buzenborg do—only their spaceships are big enough to hold five people instead of only two—then they take an assumed name, get a job where they'll come into contact with lots of men and start filling their quota of four husbands—"

"Are you sitting there in broad daylight trying to tell me that the girl I'm going to marry is a witch from Muggenwort who came to Earth to collect four husbands?"

"Yes—to collect them and take them back to Muggenwort with her. You see, Muggenwort is a small matriarchal province near the Altair VI equator, and their mating customs are as different from ours as they are from yours. All Muggenwort women have to have four husbands in order to be accepted into Muggenwort society, and as there are no longer enough men in Muggenwort to go around, they have to travel to other planets to get them. But that's not the worst of it. After they capture them and bring them back to Muggenwort, they put them to work twelve hours a day in the kritch fields while they lie around all day in their air-conditioned barkenwood huts chewing rutenstuga nuts and watching TV!"

Roger was more amused than angry now. "And how about the husbands? I suppose they take to all this docilely and don't mind in the least sharing their wife with three other men!"

"But you don't understand!" Alayne of Altair was becoming more agitated by the second. "The husbands have no choice. They're bewitched—the same way Becky is bewitching you. Do you think it was your idea to ask her to marry you? Well, it wasn't! It was her idea, planted in your mind by hypnosis. Didn't you notice those gleaming gray eyes of hers? She's a witch, Roger, and once she gets you completely in her clutches you will be her slave for life, and she must be pretty sure of you already or she wouldn't be taking you out to her spaceship this afternoon!"

"What about her other three husbands-to-be? Are they going to accompany us on our drive into the country?"

"Of course not. They're already in the ship, hopelessly bewitched, waiting for her. Didn't you notice the three anklets on her leg? Well, each of them stands for a man she has conquered. It's an old Muggenwort custom. Probably today she is wearing four. Didn't you ever wonder what happens to all the men who disappear from the face of the Earth each year, Roger?"

"No, I never did," Roger said. "But there is one thing I'm wondering about. Why did *you* come to Earth?"

Alayne of Altair's bluebird eyes dropped to his chin. "I—I was coming to that," she said. "You see, in Buzenborg, girls chase boys instead of boys chasing girls."

"That seems to be a standard operating procedure on Altair VI."

"That's because the man shortage isn't confined to Muggenwort alone but encompasses the whole planet. When push-button-type spaceships became available, Buzenborg as well as Muggenwort girls began renting them and traveling to other planets in search of husbands, and Buzenborg as well as Muggenwort girls schools started teaching alien languages and customs. The information was easily available because the Altair VI world government has been sending secret anthropological expeditions to Earth, and planets like it, for years, so that we will be ready to make contact with you when you finally lick space travel and qualify for membership in the League of Super Planets."

"What's the Buzenborg husband quota?" Roger asked acidly.

"One. That's why we Buzenborg girls wear wodgets. We're not like those witches from Muggenwort. They don't care whom they get, just so they have strong backs; but we girls from Buzenborg do. Anyway, when my wodget registered ninety, I knew that you and I were ideally suited for each other, and that's why I struck up a conversation with you. I—I didn't know at the time that you were half bewitched."

"Suppose your wodget had been right. What then?"

"Why, I'd have taken you back to Buzenborg with me, of course. Oh, you'd have loved it there, Rog," she rushed on. "Our industrial corporations would be crazy about your poetic analysis of science, and you could have got a swell job, and my folks would have built us a house and we could have settled down and raised—and—raised—" Her voice grew sad. "But I guess I'll have to settle for Ashley instead. He only registers sixty on my wodget, but sixty is better than nothing."

"Are you naive enough to believe that if you go to his apartment tonight he'll marry you and return to

Buzenborg with you?"

"I have to take a chance. I only had enough money to rent the ship for a week. What do you think I am—a rich witch from Muggenwort?"

She had raised her eyes to his, and he searched them vainly for the deceit that should have been in them. There must be some way he could trap her. She had eluded his time trap and his baseball trap and

Wait a minute! Maybe she hadn't eluded his time trap after all. If she was telling the truth and really did want to cut Becky out and really did have a spaceship equipped with faster-than-light drive, she was overlooking a very large ace up her sleeve.

"Did you ever hear the limerick about Miss Bright?" he asked. She shook her head. "It goes something like this:

There was a young lady named Bright,
Whose speed was far faster than light;
She set out one day
In a relative way,
And returned home the previous night*

(*By Arthur H. B. Buller; © by *Punch*.)

"Let me elaborate," Roger went on. "I met Becky a little less than twenty-four hours before I met you, and I met her the same as I did you—on the very bench we're sitting on now. So if you're telling the truth you really don't have a problem at all. All you have to do is make a round trip to Altair VI enough in excess of the velocity of light to bring you back to Earth twenty-four hours before your original arrival. Then you simply come walking down the walk to where I'm sitting on the bench, and if your wadget is worth a plugged nickel I'll feel the same way toward you as you feel toward me."

"But that would involve a paradox, and the cosmos would have to create a time shift to compensate for it," Alayne of Altair objected. "The millisecond I attained the necessary velocity and the extent of the paradox became evident, time would go *whom!* And you, I and everybody else in the cosmos would be catapulted back to the moment when the paradox began, and we'd have no memory of the last few days. It would be as though I'd never met you, as though you'd never met me—"

"And as though I'd never met Becky. What more do you want?"

She was staring at him. "Why—why, it just might work at that. It—it would be sort of like Aparicio stealing first base. Let me see now, if I take a bus out to the farm, I'll get there in less than an hour. Then if I set the grodgel for Lapse Two, and the borque for—"

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Roger said, "come off it, will you!"

"Sh-sh!" Alayne of Altair said. "I'm trying to think."

He stood up. "Well, think then! I'm going back to my room and get ready for my date with Becky!"

Angrily he walked away. In his room, he laid his best suit out on the bed. He shaved and showered leisurely and spent a long time getting dressed. Then he went out, rented a car and drove to Becky's apartment. It was 2:00 P.M. on the nose when he rang her bell. She must have been taking a shower, because when she opened the door all she had on was a terry-cloth towel and three anklets. No, four.

"Hi, Roger," she said warmly. "Come on in."

Eagerly he stepped across the threshold and made a—

Whoom! Time went.

Little did Roger Thompson dream when he sat down on the park bench that Friday morning in June that in a celibate sense his goose was already in the oven and that soon it would be cooked. He may have had an inkling of things to come when he saw the cute blonde in the blue dress walking down the winding walk some several seconds later, but that inkling could not conceivably have apprised him of the vast convolutions of time and space which the bowing out of his bachelorhood had already set in motion.

The cute blonde sat down at the other end of the bench, produced a little red notebook and began

writing in it. Presently she glanced at her wrist watch. Then she gave a start and looked over at him.

He returned the look cordially. He saw a dusting of golden freckles, a pair of eyes the hue of bluebirds and a small mouth the color of sumac leaves after the first hard frost.

A tall brunette in a red sheath came down the walk. Roger hardly even noticed her. Just as she was opposite the bench one of her spike heels sank into a crevice and brought her to an abrupt halt. She slipped her foot out of the shoe and, kneeling down, jerked the shoe free with her hands. Then she put it back on, gave him a dirty look and continued on her way.

The cute blonde had returned her attention to her note book. Now she faced him again. Roger's heart turned three somersaults and made an *entrechat*.

"How do you xpell matrimony?" she said.