

# The Time Cylinder

Eando **Binder**

At the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, a time capsule, containing representative samples of our cultural and technological achievement, was buried. So carefully thought out were the enclosures that even a copy of a science-fiction magazine was placed in the capsule! Our descendants may some day examine the contents of this capsule with interest and astonishment. But suppose we were to find a time capsule. What might it contain? What civilization could have buried it? Eando Binder, popular author of past years, returns to science-fiction to explore this fascinating theme.

"AND you uncovered the time capsule with your plow?" asked Stoddard.

The farmer nodded. He shifted his chew of tobacco in his cheeks, astounded at all the furor this discovery had caused. "Out in my east forty I found it," he said. "Just cleared that piece. It was timber and scrub land before. My plow hit something hard just under the ground. Figured it was a rock so I scooped away dirt and there it was—or the top of it—that thing. What did you call it?"

"A time capsule," Stoddard said, trying to control his feverish excitement. "Look at it. What else could it be? A long-lasting, bronzelike cylinder twenty-five feet long, completely sealed. Very much like the others we've buried at times for future ages to find. The Archeological Institute sent Jackson and me to investigate your report of it. We thought of course—no offense—it might be simply a wild story."

Jackson also was bristling with excitement. "What a find! Look how it's tarnished and encrusted with mold. A record-cript from some long past age!"

It lay there, a riddle wrapped in tawny metal. The farmer himself had hitched up his tractor and dragged it free of the ground. What strange, unknown, past civilization had buried this record of itself, fated to be found in 1953?

"The papers will go crazy when the news gets out," Stoddard prophesied. "This is headline stuff." He whirled to the phone. "Time's wasting. I'll tell Professor Beatty at the Institute to send a truck to haul it there. Then for the grand opening. How far back does this date, Jackson? A thousand years? Ten thousand? Who knows?"

But already Jackson was staring at the time cap-sule with puzzled eyes, vaguely sensing that the answer promised to be more astounding than they yet dreamed . . .

Sirens wailed through the city streets, a few hours later. An eager crowd already lined the path of the big trailer truck as it hauled the huge cylinder, flanked by its police escort of motorcycles, to the Archeological Institute.

Extras already proclaimed it in their headlines as—TIME CAPSULE FOUND FROM DAWN OF CIVILIZATION. Radio announcers were hardly less reticent nor more accurate with "Ancient record-crypt may be a million years old." Camera crews from TV networks were at hand, recording everything on film as the giant capsule was carefully maneuvered into the back warehouse of the Institute. Nothing could so fire the imagination of the public as finding something from antiquity, throwing light on Earth's past history.

It was like the discovery of King Tut's tomb all over again, only on a grander scale. Finally the police succeeded in waving the last of the crowd away and the warehouse doors closed on the time capsule.

Professor Beatty, director of the Institute, stared at it with shocked wonder, as if somehow it had no right to exist. "We'll drop everything," he announced immediately. "Even that sorting of Mayan pottery. We'll get at this tomorrow with our whole crew."

Stoddard's face fell. "Must it wait till tomorrow? Professor, how about me and Jackson? Can't we get right to work on it? Why waste a whole day?"

Beatty had to chuckle. "That thing has been buried for untold centuries perhaps. Millions of days. What would one *more* day matter? All right, go ahead, you two eager-heavers. But you're getting the dirty work, scraping off that mold."

He left, smiling at their youthful enthusiasm. He, too, had been that way, long ago, when he came across his first find of Neolithic arrowheads.

Left alone, Stoddard and Jackson went to work with panting haste. Surprisingly, it was an easy job to chip off the hardened mold and clean the surface. Often it took days or weeks to extract ancient relics patiently from fossilized mud. This bronze cylinder began to gleam bright and clean under the final hand polishing, in less than six hours.

"Funny," Jackson muttered. "You'd think some-thing buried for any really long period of time would be far more corroded than this. What if this thing is *ahoax*?"

Stoddard yelped at the word, as if it had stabbed him. "Don't say such a thing, Jackson."

But Jackson was persistent with that gnawing doubt. "I'd swear it looks as if it had rested in the ground only a short time. Somebody might have buried it just a few years ago as a practical joke. People have done such things, you know—remember the Cardiff Giant?"

Stoddard had recovered his excitement. "Always the skeptic," he chided. "Listen, what if the makers of the cylinder knew great metal arts? What if they made an alloy resistant to the ravages of time? See?—that would explain it."

"Sure, sure," Jackson agreed with a twisted lip. "That's nice and glib. For a so-called scientist,

Stoddard, you have a most naive attitude."

"May I return the compliment?" said Stoddard, dripping honey from his voice. "You're of the hard-headed school, Jackson. Just a shade short of the lard-headed school."

Thus they worked on as a team, smoothly, oiled by mutual stabs of sarcasm flying back and forth. The casual listener might infer they were bitter personal enemies. But the sensitive observer would see their staunch friendship. Their stinging insults were really words of respect and admiration, merely couched in reverse semantics. If they ever said anything *nice* about each other, it would be the danger signal that their friendship was precarious.

"There's something peculiar about this whole thing," Jackson said seriously. "What past age could turn out a tooled cylinder like this? Certainly not the Egyptians with their clumsy stone pyramids. Nor the Sumerians with their crude clay pottery. And not any later age like the Greeks and Romans, who were great thinkers but poor doers. That metal container is as good as any we could make with modern technology. *What blasted past era could duplicate it?*"

"Isn't that what we're trying to find out?" Stoddard's tone was ironic—but also puzzled. "Yes, what unknown artisans did whip that thing together? How about it, Jackson—shall we open it up now?"

"Professor Beatty didn't give us permission to go that far," Jackson said hesitantly.

"He'd probably be sore if we did," agreed Stoddard. "And how he can rip you up and down when he's in a rage. We'd be hauled on the carpet and tongue-lashed. We'd be utter fools to open it."

"O.K.," said Jackson. "Let's open it."

They grinned at each other like two conspirators. "Hmm. If we can," amended Stoddard, feeling his way along the smooth cylinder. "How do we open it? The thing has no screw top, like the time capsule buried at the New York World's Fair in 1939. It has no doors or openings of any kind. Solid, smooth, from end to end! Are we supposed to blast it open with dynamite? Or use an oxy-acetylene torch?"

Jackson went over it inch by inch, but it was getting dark now. "I'll turn on the lights and we'll give it a more thorough going-over. It must have *some* kind of opening, or means of getting inside."

But Jackson's finger paused at the light switch, at a sharp word from Stoddard. "Wait, Jackson—give a look. I don't think we need lights. It *glows* in the dark!"

Eerily, it was so.

As the gloom within the warehouse deepened with the fading light of day, the time capsule began to glow. Brighter and brighter it shone, until it was gleaming all over with a soft rosy light, revealing its every contour perfectly, by itself.

"Weird!" breathed Stoddard, caught by the wonder of it. "Somehow they incorporated its own light-giving mechanism within the capsule. Maybe to make *sure* it would be found some day, or for that matter, some night. It would send out light if the least portion of it were uncovered from the ground. But figure out how it lights up like that, Jackson—all over, uniformly. Radioactive principle?"

Jackson was already there with the Geiger counter, a standard item with archeologists who use radioactivity as a yardstick to measure eons of time. "Not a peep from the counter. No radioactivity."

Stoddard was more baffled.

"No sign of luminous paint, or phosphorescent coating. Maybe, Jackson—just maybe that metal is somehow excited by *cosmic rays*! They stream down on earth all the time, as they (did a billion years ago, and as they will a billion years from now. It would be the one sure way of making the time capsule self-luminous for all ages to come, to the end of time."

"Cosmic ray luminosity," echoed Jackson scorn-fully. "That is in the category of scientific wizardry. How do you think up such fairy tales, Stoddard? It may have happened by sheer accident, as well. Rot-ting stumps become luminous too. Or peat, buried in the ground. If you ask me, this may be a big hoax. It doesn't acid up right, somehow."

"You're suspicious," Stoddard muttered, "even when two and two make four, right in front of your eyes. If we could only open it, we'd find the answer. But I've gone over it twice. It's still like the un-broken shell of an egg—"

He stopped. They froze.

A sound came from the enigmatic cylinder. A soft slithering sound. As they stared in paralyzed fascination, they saw the unbelievable. Three holes popped open by themselves, in the side of the capsule, and three rods of metal extended themselves silently. Invitingly.

Stoddard stuttered: "The solid metal softened and opened by itself, letting out levers."

"Levers?"

Stoddard pointed. "What else? Look, numerals on the knobs of each. The first is marked with a simple Roman numeral I. The second II. The third III. So we use the levers in that order. A half-witted ape could figure that out."

"Glad you did." Jackson grinned. "All right, go to it."

Stoddard moved the first handle, holding his breath. A low hum rose within the capsule. He waited, then moved number II. The hum changed to a whirr of oiled parts intermeshing. Number III resulted in a soft swish . . .

The door of the time capsule opened before them.

It was a large, round flap that miraculously de-tached itself from the seemingly solid metal and swung wide. From the inside came a rush of musty dry air or gas, as if the interior had been under pressure.

"Helium, no doubt," Jackson said. "An inert gas, preserving things timelessly, without harm. We sealed many of our relics in helium gas, in our own time capsules."

Stoddard peered in. The interior too was lighted brightly and automatically. It was crammed with pre-served items.

"Still a hoax, Jackson?" Stoddard needed. "A bunch of clever junk whipped up by some practical joker?"

"Why not?" replied Jackson. "That's more logical than expecting them to be relics of a great and un-known civilization of Antarctica or wherever. Never-theless, one of us may get a big shock."

Stoddard's eyes were glowing.

"Jackson," he said eagerly. "What an opportunity for us. You and I are the two youngest members of the Institute. Mere apprentices, so to speak. Begin-ners. Neophytes. But what if we pinned down the origin of this amazing mystery *tonight*? Before Beatty and Henderson and Povkin and the other big guns take over? What a deal for us! But that would mean working through the night, unpacking the capsule. Are you game, Jackson?"

"That," said Jackson, "is perhaps the most silly question asked since the beginning of the cosmos. Who could sleep anyway, thinking about such an exciting riddle? I'm with you. I can just picture their faces tomorrow when we tell them exactly where the time cylinder came from. That is, if luck is with us. Let's get cracking."

In dead silence, Stoddard took the relics out and handed them to Jackson. There was a large, cleared space on the floor of the warehouse, and Jackson carefully laid the items in neat rows.

The two young archeologists were panting in sweat in their hurry. But they were breathless from more than their labors. Through them tingled the thrill of entering the spirit-haunted tomb of an an-cient Egyptian pharaoh. Or it was like finding the fossil bones of some hitherto unknown species of mankind. Or the wreck of a spaceship or flying saucer. All these things and more.

The treasures were books with metallic leaves, printed in an unknown language. There were photo-graphs with a vividly three-dimensional illusion. There were samples of plastic clothing that seemed utterly rip-proof, stronger than steel yet lighter than down.

Item by item piled up, unbelievably.

"All the paraphernalia of a magnificent civilization more advanced than *ours*," Stoddard gloated. "Well, Jackson? Is this still a spurious hoax spawned in the twisted mind of a guy playing it for laughs?"

"Why not?" Jackson returned stubbornly, but with an uncertain air. "I want positive proof to the contrary."

"You've got it," Stoddard sang, holding up photo-graphs of startling detail. "Scenes on other worlds! One of these has a canal, like Mars would have. They had space ships and interplanetary travel. When have *you* been to Mars lately, Jackson?"

"Hollywood," said Jackson, "can make better sets than those. Those scenes prove nothing—not to me."

Stoddard let out a triumphant yell, as he took out what appeared to be a small mechanical model of a spaceship. He touched a tiny stud on its side. It hissed and leaped out of his hand.

It spun up toward the warehouse rafters at blazing speed. Then it turned as if sensing the roof against which it might crash, swooped down like a boomerang, and wheeled in wide circles over their heads. Finally it slowed down and came to a halt . . .

In mid-air!

"I'll be a Neanderthal!" Stoddard gasped. "Do you know what that is, Jackson? Nothing less than an *anti-gravity* motor. Look. There it hangs in thin air!"

"Anti-gravity?" Jackson gulped.

Stoddard had no mercy. "Oh nonsense, Jackson. Your version of the truth is that some crackpot spent a million dollars to develop anti-gravity, and then stuck it in this time capsule so he could laugh up his sleeve at us."

Jackson broke down. "You win, Stoddard. I withdraw my sadly shattered hoax theory. But what's your theory? Did the Egyptians have such a miracle of science? Or the Dravidians? The early Mongols? Or any dead civilization we ever heard of?"

"No, none we ever heard of," agreed Stoddard. "If only we could pin it down . . . All!" He pulled something else out of the time capsule. "This gadget is unmistakably a *movie projector*."

It was shaped like a modified movie projector of compact size, but with no connecting cord. "How do we run it?" Jackson puzzled. "How do we feed it current?"

Stoddard pondered and then pretended to kick himself. "What asses we are. Everything else is self-contained, so this must be. It probably has its own built-in power system, too. I press this button."

With a buzz, the machine came to life, casting pictures before their eyes, in dazzling grandeur."

"How do you like that?" Stoddard grunted. "We don't even need a screen. It builds images *in thin air*."

They watched in silent wonder. It was all like fairyland. Arabian Nights. Alice in Wonderland. Magic.

The scenes were fantastic, of towering cities spanned with a network of spidery ramps, of strato-sphere rocket liners, and robot workers, and space-ships cleaving among the stars.

Jackson spoke in a hush. "Stoddard! It's all like a dream. It can't be real!"

Stoddard glared back with a laugh, but then his face became serious. "I feel like somebody hit me on the head too. It's all so incredible and yet—listen. A voice!"

A man's face appeared in the mid-air "screen." His clothing was odd; he had a flowing mantle at his shoulders. He wore a jaunty feathered hat. He was evidently a commentator, speaking in rapid-fire accents, no doubt telling of his own amazing civilization. They listened for a long moment.

"What is it?" demanded Jackson, impatiently. "Don't hold out on me, you idiot. Is it ancient Greek? Phoenician? Syrian? What?"

But Stoddard's face was stunned, more stunned than at any time before, as he strained to understand the staccato voice.

"No. It's just—just *gibberish*, Jackson."

"What—even *to you*?" Jackson was truly startled. "But you're a dead-language expert. You could even recognize spoken Sanskrit, the granddaddy of all language, couldn't you?"

"Yes," admitted Stoddard matter-of-factly, without conceit. "Even if it were Sanskrit spoken with a lisp by a Neanderthal man with an Irish accent. I should understand a word here and there, no matter what fossil language it is. It's the *root* words that count. But I don't understand a thing, Jackson. Not a syllable. Not one syllable, Jackson."

Jackson spoke quietly, in awe.

"That makes it *completely* fantastic."

"You can say that again," exploded Stoddard, pacing the floor. "Sit down, Jackson. There's only one answer to this. There was an Ice Age circa 25,000 B.C., wasn't there? If a civilization existed *before* that, it would have been wiped from the memory of man. Therefore, I submit that the voice we hear was first recorded more than 250 centuries ago!"

"Impossible," spat Jackson instantly. "Civilization on Earth that long ago? That's in the never-never category of Atlantis and Mu and all such un-proved rot."

Stoddard spread his hands.

"That's the only possible answer, Jackson. Just think, we've stumbled on something sensational. Something that will blast the roof off of archeology and all related sciences, here in staid old 1953. What else can it be but a *Pre-Ice-Age* civilization?"

"Impossible," said Jackson again. "Impossible."

"Is that the only stupid word you know?" Stoddard sneered. "Why couldn't there have been such a civilization, ground under by the Ice Age glaciers?"

"Impossible," Jackson reiterated firmly. "Let's be sensible, Stoddard. It just doesn't *fit*. We've found evidence of Neanderthal and Heidelberg and Pill-downnian, and other such rudimentary cultures as far back as 500,000 years ago. How could this inconceivable, grade A culture pop out of a clear blue sky in the middle of that Stone Age era? It's like finding out they used the atom bomb in Medieval times."

"All right," Stoddard improvised. "Then it was *prior* to 500,000 B.C."

"Impossible," Jackson frowned. "How ridiculous can you get? We've found fossil bones of dinosaurs from millions and millions of years ago, perfectly pre-served. Why not fossil remains of that Hypothetical race and civilization? Again it fits like a square peg in a round hole—like the hole in your head."

Stoddard skipped the chance for a brisk and de-lightful exchange of insults. He was desperate now. "So it's a civilization that wiped *itself* out—with atom bombs for instance—leaving absolutely no traces."

"Again impossible," Jackson snorted. "Even if you turn all cities into junk with bombs, who takes away the junk? Impossible."

"If you say that word oncemore "

"Inconceivable, then," Jackson drawled, with mock fright. "You're a flawless idiot. Stoddard, talking like that, if they ever dig up your fossil skeleton in the future, how will they ever explain the *wooden* skull they find? Once and for all, it's inconceivable-incomprehensible—incredible—unconscionable—take your pick of synonyms for impossible—for *any* past civilization to vanish from this Earth without a trace."

Stoddard looked at the bronze capsule, glinting in its own mocking radiance, almost with hate now. "I wish we'd never found the thing," he growled. "Do they take good care of you in insane asylums? What is the answer to this riddle?"

Jackson ventured no answer. She was sunk in deep perplexity.

"The worst of it is," sighed Stoddard, "there goes our bubble of fame—poof! And we were going to amaze Betty—and the world—with our brilliant de-duction of the time capsule's origin! We might as well give up and turn in."

It was close to dawn now.

But Jackson, face aglow with inspiration, now fiddled with the movie projector. "This stud. I guess that turns it back to the beginning. And this other stud "

Soon, the formerly heard enigmatic voice filled the air again, but at a lower pitch, almost in a drag-ging drawl.

Stoddard sat bolt upright, face thunderstruck. "Listen, Jackson. I can understand him now—vaguely, that is. What did you do besides starting the film from the beginning?"

Jackson was excited now. "Just on a hunch, I slowed down the gadgets with this other stud. The pictures are in slow-motion now. And the voice—yes, now we can make out some words."

They listened patiently for a long while. Stoddard shook his head, not getting enough of it to make sense. But Jackson seemed to understand it.

"What's it all about?" pleaded Stoddard. "Do you get the drift of it?"

Jackson nodded, speaking in a low, tense voice.

"It's a queer story, Stoddard. The queerest story ever told since the creation. Use your imagination to fill in the gaps. Think once picture a great and glorious civilization such as the one that buried this time capsule. Think of them coming to—the end of the road. That's the commentator's reference, as I got it, to some kind of blight. A frightful blight that wiped out their race, one person after another."

Jackson paused, and went on sadly. "Even their superb science couldn't halt the blight. They faced oblivion. A blank future, in which their world would be lifeless barren—for the blight attacked all living things, all animals and plants. Their world was stripped, denuded of all life. Tragic ...horrible .. .ghastly ."

It was a moment before Jackson could go on.

"But they wanted to leave a record. They wanted someone to know about them. Their place in history. Their niche in the universe. They didn't want to pass on into eternity without leaving some marker behind. Yet it would do them no good to just bury a time capsule on their world, for a future age to see. Be-cause—the cosmic irony of it all!—there would be no future age! Don't you get it now, Stoddard?"

"Yes," breathed Stoddard. "Sure I get it. They were from another world!"



He stopped as if startled at his own words, then went on in an excited rush. "They couldn't bury a time capsule on their own world, because there would be no future beings to dig it up. So they migrated through space—those pitiful few that were left after the ravages of the blight—and buried *it there on earth*. That accounts for the lack of remains of their civilization—it never existed here. And did you notice when the speaker turned his head once? It bulged. They had maybe 25 per cent bigger brain capacity than we. Obviously *nothomosapiens*, but people from another world, with no future ahead. That's perfect now—perfect!"

"Perfect," agreed Jackson wearily. "Perfect *rot*. Their language why did I understand it, as well as I understand you? Those people were humans with larger craniums."

Stoddard held his breath.

Jackson spoke slowly, measuring each word carefully, knowing in awe that it was the most dramatic revelation of all time.

"All previous time capsules were buried *for a future* age to find. But with their superb science, using time-machine mechanisms, these humans sent their capsules into *the past*."

Jackson finished in a whisper.

"That time capsule is from our own human race, changed only by evolution from One Million A.D.—from *the future!*"

Stoddard gasped.

Two thoughts hit him like jolts of lightning. "*A time capsule—literally.*" Then his voice turned grim and sad. "The human race *ends there ... a million years from now ... finis ... Here lies the last man ...*"

He recovered himself and grabbed Jackson in his arms, embracingly. "Jackson, you genius! We shake the world after all. But how did you suspect it was *future English*, streamlined and speeded-up, as in all evolution of language?"

"My stupid Darling," said Helen, "Haven't you ever heard of *feminine intuition?*"