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The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction



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ON THE COVER: Painting by Rudolph Belarski depicts a scene from **BEYOND THE VORTEX**, by Frank Belknap Long.

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Read our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—**STARTLING STORIES**



Brett and Laura found Ruth bound to a chair

THE ETERNAL NOW

By MURRAY LEINSTER

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CHAPTER I

Infinity Machine

THERE was sunlight. There were colors. There were noises. They stood in a perfectly normal office, on a perfectly normal afternoon, in a perfectly normal world. A typist was at work in an adjoining room. There was a deep humming noise in the air, which was the city itself, vividly alive and in motion.

"And, Dr. Brett, this is my niece, Miss

Hunt," Laura's uncle said comfortably. "I think she'll be inter—"

Harry Brett's hand closed on that of the girl as she smiled at him. Her hand in his was very pleasant, and she was a very pretty girl. . . .

He felt an intolerable shock in every atom of his body. It was like a blow which hit him simultaneously all over, inside and out. He had a feeling of falling endlessly and a sensation of bitter cold. His eyes were closed, and he opened them, and then he sat upright with a gasp of amazement.

AN ASTONISHING COMPLETE NOVELET

He was no longer standing in the office of Burroughs and Lawson, in the Chanin Building on Forty-second Street. He was sitting down—reclining, rather—in what felt like a beach-chair. But it didn't look like a beach-chair. He was out-of-doors somewhere, but it didn't look like out-of-doors. He was in a city, but it looked like no city he had ever dreamed of. His first instinct was to think that he had died, somehow, and this was the vestibule of another world. The setting was appropriate for a waiting-place beside the Styx.

Everything was gray, and everything was silent, and there were no shadows. After the first stunned, unbelieving instant, he saw that he was on a sort of terrace, as if outside a penthouse in a quite impossible universe. There was a thin dry mist everywhere, but nearby an angular structure soared skyward. It was gray, like everything else. It possessed rows of windows, but they appeared to be filled with an opaque gray material instead of glass. He saw that building over a sort of hedge which resembled box-wood, but it was gray—and there were no shadows between the leaves. Close beside him there was a climbing plant which had gray leaves, and gray stalks, and gray flowers. There was, however, no fragrance in the air. There were no smells at all. The result was startling.

But the silence was enough to crack his ear-drums. He swallowed, and the noise in his own throat seemed thunderous. The buildings stood. That was all. No movement. No life. No sound! There was not even the normally unnoticed murmur of a breeze.

He pinched himself, and it hurt. He stirred speculatively, and the cushion rustled beneath him. He stood up, and his feet made noises on the gray stone beneath the chair. To himself he seemed to make a terrific clatter as he moved across the terrace to look incredulously over the edge.

HIS sleeve brushed against one of the plants. There was the sound of ripping cloth. He was startled. In this noiseless gray twilight without shadows he could not credit what his eyes told him. He had torn his coat on a fragile shrub. He struck a match to see the plant more clearly. It shone out in the matchlight a dark blue-green. It looked more than ever like box. It was! But he touched a leaf, and could not believe his senses. The leaf was immovable. It was as rigid as a stone wall. It was harder than iron. He could not bend it. When he pushed with all his strength he could feel no trace of yielding. When he touched the dirt

under it, his fingers slid over the irregularities as if they had been glass.

He muttered incredulously and looked over the edge. The gray haze hid the ground beneath. It hid the sky. But he seemed to see dimly the outline of another building through it.

His match scorched his fingers. He blew it out and stared at them. His flesh was the same dead-gray as everything else. It moved and wrinkled naturally, but it looked like gray marble. He struck a second match—and his hand was normal in color.

A thought hammered suddenly at the back of his head. "Mass-nullifier! Mass-nullifier!" Then he looked around him with his throat going dry as ashes. A horrible suspicion built up in his mind. It was something to make for insanity. Because he'd been working four years on a theory that mass was not an inherent, unchangeable property of matter. He'd proved it, but he'd come upon facts so dangerous and so deadly that he'd resolved to drop his experiments and destroy his apparatus. Yet this gray world about him was proof that someone else had made the same discovery.

He had a sensation as if ice water flowed in all his veins instead of blood. He was cold all over. This gray world, this immovable plant—it could be nothing else. And there could be but one man who would have wished to do this, and it was irrevocable . . .

Then he heard a sound which was not of his own making. It was a gasp. He whirled, and made out a second beach-chair on the terrace. A gray figure stirred in it, and gasped again.

Dr. Harry Brett struck a third match. Its light showed color once more. The gray figure was a girl, Laura Hunt, with whom he had been shaking hands the instant before waking in this weird world.

"G-good heavens!" said the girl, staring in terror. "Where am I? What has happened?" "I'm—not quite sure," said Brett unsteadily. "I'm trying not to believe my eyes. Haven't you any idea?"

He was not truthful. He did know where he was. When he was, at any rate. But it would be most merciful to keep her from knowing as long as possible.

"N-no." The girl's voice quavered. "There can't be any place like this!" She hesitated. "Are we—dead?"

"Not yet," said Brett in an attempt at humor.

He crawled, internally, because of what he knew. He had put a live mouse, once, into the field of his mass-nullifier. He'd turned the machine on and off again, instantly.



As they babbled desperate promises, Brett pressed the button

Where the mouse had been in its cage there was only a little heap of dust, with friable bits of unidentifiable bone and streaks of red rust. That had told him everything—why his first machines destroyed themselves by rusting until he plated them with chromium, what the removal of mass from an object meant, and the real significance of Einstein's formula for the mass and the time-rate of an object moving at the speed of light. Nobody had thought of the reverse of that formula, but he'd hit on it by accident when looking for something else. Now—!

"We're not dead," he said, steadying his voice deliberately. "I feel quite natural. I think we'd better try to find out what has really happened. We were just being introduced when this thing started," he added. He spoke urgently because he saw a terror, close to hysteria, in the girl's eyes. "Your name is Hunt, isn't it?"

"Yes, Laura Hunt. And you are Harry Brett, some sort of scientist. Can you do anything?"

"I'm going to try," said Brett. But he was utterly without hope. "First I'll take a look around. Do you want to wait here?"

"I—" The girl looked around at the dead-gray, misty surroundings. "No! I'll come with you!"

The match burned out between his fingers again. She cried out.

"I look like a ghost," said Brett. "I know! So do you. Look at your hands." She gasped at the gray, stony color of her skin. He struck yet another match. Her hands looked natural again.

"It's the light," said Brett. "There's no color in this world."

"There's a colored light there," the girl said faintly.

FROM inside a gray doorway, across a gray room, down a gray hallway, came a subdued yellow glow. Brett's heart pounded. Hope would die hard, he knew. But there was only one man in the world who knew anything at all about Harry Brett's mass-nullifier. That was Professor Aldous Cable, who had been embittered by the necessity of accepting employment as Brett's assistant, and who hated him because Brett had achieved where he had not. There was no one else who could have brought this about, or wanted to do so.

"I don't suppose the light will come to us," said Brett. "I think we'd better go to it."

He tucked the girl's hand under his arm and moved toward the opening through which the light showed.

"I—really think I've gone crazy!" she said

shakily. "This simply can't be!"

Harry did not answer. They stepped through a doorway. They were no longer in the open air. But it was exactly as light, inside, as underneath the sky. The walls and ceiling and floor and furniture showed no shadows. The girl's hand had tightened with alarm. Everything was luminous—even the two of them! She caught her breath.

"Steady!" he said. "I'm just as scared as you are."

He was in a worse mental state so far as apprehension went. He knew what had happened. Einstein has postulated that there is an inherent relationship of mass and time-rate, so that if a material object—such as a space-ship—went at only slightly less than the speed of light, its mass would be almost infinite and it would move out of normal time. What seemed a second to the space-navigators might seem a century or a millennium to the rest of the universe. But there was no question now of an increase of mass to near-infinity. The question was of its decrease to near-zero!

A flashlight lay on the floor beside the hallway. It was turned on, and its beam unwinkingly illuminated a room. Where the light struck, the room seemed completely normal. Rugs and furniture. There was a woman at a dressing-table, coloring her lips.

"I beg your pardon," gasped Laura Hunt. "Will you answer a question?"

The woman did not move. She was unnaturally still. She was motionless as a stone is motionless. Brett moved forward. He touched her shoulder. It was as immovable as a mountain. Sweat started out on his forehead.

"What is it?" asked the girl, shivering.

"It's what I was afraid of," said Brett grimly. "But this light shouldn't work, and it does. Let's see!"

He touched the flashlight. It yielded. He picked it up. It was a perfectly ordinary flashlight with dry batteries inside.

"Maybe this is intended to make me hope," he said with a flash of bitterness. "The spirit may be of mockery but I am to accept facts. Come along!"

He swung the flashing beam about. Wherever it touched, the ghostly, glowing walls and floors looked normal. The rugs? Brett touched one with his foot. Each separate thread was iron-hard and iron-firm. He could not bend the most minute fibre. He grimaced.

"We're intended to hope—for a while," he said grimly. "Let's see what the rest of it is."

The girl clung to him as he moved down the hallway.

"You know what's happened?" she asked him.

"Now, yes," said Brett. "I was messing around with a theory that mass mightn't be inherent in matter. Einstein says that an object could have infinite mass. The quantity of substance wouldn't change, but its mass could—and its time-rate. I wondered what would happen if you reduced an object's mass to near-zero. And I've found out."

They came to the open door of the apartment. The flashlight showed them elevator-doors. Harry Brett pushed his thumb against a call-button. It was immovable. He turned off the flashlight.

A flickering yellow glow showed in the stair-well. On the next landing down, a highly commonplace candle burned smokily, stuck in the neck of a bottle.

"I see!" said Brett bitterly. "Cable's arranged this. It couldn't be anyone else. He was my assistant and helped in my experiments. I made a machine which would take the mass out of anything within its field. It was only part electrical, but it worked. I didn't like what I found out, though. Einstein says an object can have infinite mass and a time-rate which is nil."

CAUTIOUSLY they went down the steps. He leaned over the stair-rail and saw other yellow glows below them. Markers, evidently, to lead them to some intended destination.

"I found a way to make a mass almost nil," he told the girl. "Not quite nil, but almost. I found it implied a time-rate which was almost infinite! The obverse of Einstein's formula. If one made a space-ship—or a man—have almost zero mass, instead of one second to him or them meaning centuries or aeons of normal time—why—an aeon of his time would pass in a second of normal experience. That's what's happened to us. We're living perhaps a hundred million times as fast as normal. We could live here all our lives, and die of old age—and a clock in normal time wouldn't have clicked off a single second."

The girl stumbled. They passed another candle in a bottle. Harry held the flashlight before them and the separate steps were distinct.

"But how could it happen?"

"My assistant!" said Brett, bitterly. "Cable! He was jealous of the fact that I was getting results and he's never been able to do any really original research. When I found out what my machine would do, I stopped. It had possibilities that were too

horrible to think of. I didn't think he knew them. But it's evident that he duplicated my machine on his own, and that we're here because he used his machine on us. That's the only possibility I can think of, anyhow. Still, there are some oddities—"

He stopped. The girl shivered. They had reached the bottom of the stair-well. There was a respectable blaze of yellow light ahead. It came out of an open door and shone into an elaborate foyer and upon an absolutely rigid, absolutely motionless elevator-operator with a braided uniform. Brett clamped his jaw tightly and led the way toward the lighted door. It was most likely that he had been lured here to read a mocking message bidding him remember the heap of dust, which had been the mouse of his experiment and promising to watch for the imponderable remnant which, in normal time, would soon be Dr. Harry Brett.

He entered the door, prepared for any mockery. But he faced a desk, lighted by hundreds of candles in receptacles. He saw Professor Aldous Cable sitting at that desk, lean and dark and shaking with hatred, with heaps of hopeless calculations and diagrams before him.

"Hello," said Brett ironically. "Why did you bring us here?"

Cable ground his teeth. His features expressed at once the bitterest possible hatred and a haunting horror. But rage overlaid all of it.

"You know where you are!" he said thickly.

"I can make a pretty good guess," admitted Brett coolly.

"Then find a way to get back," said Cable savagely. "I can't!"

CHAPTER II

A Fool for a Master

BRETT found there was almost a community of people in the duplex apartment which had an entrance behind the desk. Cable had been working desperately on his problem when Brett and Laura Hunt arrived. Now he led them to an inner door, shaking with a rage which choked him. He flung open the door.

"Here he is," he cried savagely. "Tell him what to do."

He pushed Laura through. Brett followed quickly. The door closed. Professor Aldous Cable remained outside, his hands clenched.

The room was huge, and there were almost a dozen people in it. Four or five were men, mostly younger than Cable, and the balance were women of various types but tending toward the lean and intellectual. There was one girl of a lush, red-headed beauty, though. All of the people had one thing in common. Each had eyes which were filled with horror close to madness.

A record on a phonograph came to an end and stopped.

"Turn it on again, for heaven's sake!" someone said desperately.

A man put the needle back in its groove. It began to grind out a senseless melody which had only one virtue, that of noise. At once Brett understood. By the looks of things these people had been here for a long while, corresponding to weeks. And this world was silent, and still, and changeless. Time had stopped. Motion had stopped. Human figures in the streets glowed faintly in the gray twilight. And these people were nearly mad with horror.

A young man with a twitching face came over to Brett. "You're B-Brett?" he stammered. "Professor C-Cable said you'd get us out of this! Are you Dr. B-rett?"

Brett nodded. The young man gulped. "Then help us!" he cried shrilly. "We're all going crazy! Professor Cable is crazy already! We'll all go m-mad."

Tension broke. A girl cried out. The cry went around the room. There was a rush, and Brett found them crowding about him, pawing at him, babbling at him. They were nerve-racked and trembling. They were stare-eyed and shivering. All of them appeared to be hysterical. Brett pushed Laura Hunt behind him.

"Stop it," he said sternly. "Hold everything—hold onto yourselves!"

But it had no effect. The babble grew to a clamor, a wild uproar. They pulled at Brett. They shrieked at him. They gibbered at him. He was the center of what seemed to be a mass nervous breakdown. It was deafening, inarticulate, terrible. Brett was shocked to see otherwise unharmed human beings so completely shattered by long-continued horror.

The door behind Brett opened again. The tall, lean, raging figure of Cable stalked in. For the moment he was not seen, but he quickly compelled attention.

"Quiet!" he roared.

Instantly the shrieking ceased. Save for the wheezy, senseless noise of the mechanical phonograph at the other end of the room, there was dead silence. These per-

sons who had seemed so frenzied, cringed before Cable. They were like people stricken dumb. Fearfully they moved back. But they looked even more fearfully from Brett to Cable and back again.

"Answer his questions," stormed Cable. "Tell him what he wants to know. Do whatever he tells you. But be quiet!"

He did not look at Brett. He went out of the door again and closed it behind him. There was a terrified hush. Brett felt a trembling hand upon his arm. It was Laura, wide-eyed and white. He covered her hand with his own.

"Steady!" he said in a low tone. "I didn't look for anything like this, but it's a darned sight better than I did look for."

He understood, now, why he had been allowed to waken on that terrace out-of-doors, in a still unidentified apartment. Cable was frantic with rage because he had been forced to call upon Brett. He had awakened Brett high overhead, and led him down the long stair-well by lighted candles to mark the way, because it was intolerable to him to face Brett. By having Brett waken and find out for himself that he was in a world where time had stopped, he could avoid having to explain the facts that Brett was forced to discover.

Now by thrusting him among these poor devils for further explanation he could avoid otherwise necessary face-to-face talk with the man he envied, hated, and had robbed. He could have made the explanations ten times more clearly himself, but he hated Brett so vindictively that he must have someone else beg the aid that he needed, himself. So Brett must learn all necessary facts indirectly.

HE FACED the nerve-racked people sternly.

"Sit down!" he commanded. "I just got here. I know what all this is about, but I've got to find out what's happened in order to fix it. Sit down and answer some questions."

He could guess something from the types of the people before him. They were the sort of persons who would flatter Professor Cable's vanity—and he had an enormous and insatiable vanity. Cable had been a brilliant student, and great things were prophesied for him. He'd been the youngest full professor of physics in America, for a time. But his reputation had never increased. He was a poor instructor because of his arrogant, contemptuous manner toward his pupils. Professor Cable had contributed nothing in the way of original re-

search except pretentious papers announcing enormously important discoveries which never quite checked up. In the end he'd been asked to resign his professorship because of an attempt to win recognition for an alleged discovery by blatant trickery. The fact was simply that he was not qualified for original and independent work, and his vanity would not allow him to admit it. But he was a capable man under direction, and as Brett's assistant he had been useful enough. Now, though, Cable had certainly managed to mess things up!

"I suspect that most of you knew Professor Cable before this," said Brett. "A sort of coterie, eh?"

It was true. One trembling voice offered a fact, and another offered another. In minutes Brett had their part in the picture.

Cable had surrounded himself of evenings with an admiring group because of his pretensions to enormous authority and prestige as a scientist. He fed upon their admiration—and was galled by his subordinate position to Brett. Brett's success with the mass-nullifier research had filled him with raging envy because he could not claim it for himself. And when Brett ruefully decided that his results were too dangerous to be published, Cable had no reason to be discreet.

He boasted to his admirers of the mass-nullifier, as if it were his own discovery. He painted a picture of a journey in a time-field, when as the field operated the world seemed to stop dead in all its affairs, the light of the sun slowed so that its yellow glare faded to deep red and went out, and a man would see briefly by slowed-up X-rays, and then later by the ghostly light of cosmic rays themselves. As the time-rate went up and up, Cable had said, there would come at last a ghostly gray light which would be that of the infinitely short vibrations which are gravitation. And he pictured such a journey as possible in the machine he told them he had devised.

One of his admirers quoted Wells' "The Time Accelerator," and spoke of the opportunity such a device would offer to criminals. Cable explained, tolerantly, saying a person in such a monstrously accelerated time-rate could easily see objects which moved too fast for ordinary perception. A bullet in mid-flight would seem stationary, to him. Even a lightning-flash would seem the most deliberate of motions. But his own efforts would be too brief to affect any object still remaining in a normal time-rate. Nothing which moved more slowly than miles per second would seem to him to stir. For him to thrust

at a thread with all his strength would be an application of force for such an infinitesimal fraction of a second that he could not stir it enough for him to see its motion. He could not raise it to a speed of miles per second—stated in normal time—with a thrust which—again in normal time—might last only for millionths or billionths of a second. And of course he couldn't steal anything or kill anyone.

"Unless," Cable had explained, "he took another machine with him and brought the thing he wanted to steal or the man he wanted to kill into his own fast time-rate."

Then he started. The phrase was a flash of pure perception. It was probably the most brilliant thought Cable ever had in his life. He'd already made a mass-nullifier of his own. It worked, as he knew, because it converted the energy of mass into the energy of time-speed. He had not tried it, but he was confident that it would work better than any Dr. Harry Brett had made because of an "improvement" he had made in the design. Now, having caught at this new inspiration, he embodied a second mass-nullifier. He got into the field of the first machine, carrying the second. He turned on the first. The light of the sun turned red and died. Ultimately he saw a dull-gray misty twilight which was the earth's gravitational field changed into light by the incredible time-rate to which he had attained.

The fawning, nerve-racked folk told all this to Harry Brett in the great living-room in which they were camped like looters. They could not explain much more, but he could fill additional details for himself.

CABLE had used the second machine. He had been able, of course, to march through the utterly soundless city, and when he coiled the machine's field-cable about an object in normal time—an object he could not possibly stir—and threw the switch, that object came into accelerated time, and he could do as he pleased with it. He opened doors and entered banks and jewelry shops. He gathered himself a king's ransom in portable but stolen wealth. Yet he was inherently a fool. He needed admiration. Having gathered riches, he craved applause.

He found one member of his coterie, seemingly frozen and certainly immobile like the rest of the world. He circled her with the field-cable—it was the lushly beautiful redhead—and brought her to consciousness in the world of gray twilight. Her name was Ruth Jones. She was a girl cub reporter. Maybe Cable had some idea of getting pub-

licity through her story. But the girl instantly became hysterical with terror. She clung to him, however, because he was alive in a world which was like a nightmare of death. He was not afraid—he was a fool—and her terror made him feel strong and admirable. He found others of his usual circle of admirers. They wakened to find themselves in this world of no-time, this world of an eternal now. They were terrified, but they followed him docilely because only he could take them back to the normal world.

For days he exulted in his strange position. He was lord of the treasures of the Earth. There was no single object upon the globe that he could not take if he wished. He was master of the lives of those he had brought here. Food? There was food in plenty all about, but it was gray and faintly luminous unless a light from a high-time-rate light shone upon it. And even then it was utterly unreachable. It could not be moved or taken or eaten. Even water could not be drunk unless Cable used his mass-nullifier to turn it to liquid. His victims could not defy him. They could only fawn upon him for life and the means of living.

"He must have had a swell time," said Harry Brett grimly. "The man's crazy with vanity. But you left something out. There's a great deal of jewelry around."

There was. Even the men had jewelry wherever jewelry could be put. They looked uneasily at each other. But Dr. Harry Brett was now their only hope. So they told him that Cable had, on occasion, grandly distributed largesse. He was master of the treasures of the world. He let them help themselves to wealth. Every one had a small fortune in gems or paper money hidden away in their clothing. But they would give it all, they babbled fearfully, to see sunlight once more and to hear noises that other people made. . . .

"No doubt," said Brett. "But why can't he take you back?"

Voices lowered. They looked fearfully at the door. At long last, they said, Cable had consented to return them to the normal world. They had all trooped within the field-cable of his original machine. They were rich, but even then they were nervous and jumpy. Whenever Cable scowled at them, they were filled with panic. Finally he had taken his own place among them and thrown the switch!

Nothing had happened. Nothing had ever happened. He'd worked feverishly, even frenziedly, and a dozen times they'd got within the field-cable's circuit, but they could

not return to normal time. They were marooned in this world in which time did not pass, this world in which it was eternally now.

That had been a long time ago. A terribly long time ago. The machine would only work to bring things from normal time-rate into this, but it could put nothing back!

"He made the machine and got himself here, and got you here, and then couldn't get back," said Brett ironically. "Rather stupid, eh? So at last he had to bring me here! And I happened to be shaking hands with a girl, and he couldn't speed up the time-rate on one of us alone, so he brought us both. The man's a fool!"

The door opened again. The lean dark figure of Cable appeared. His eyes blazed. It was plain that he had listened to every word. His followers cringed. He was trembling with rage.

"You think I'm a fool, eh?" he rasped. "Very well. Come on and get to work! I'm the boss this time. You're working for me. You'll make that machine work or I'll have these people roast you over a slow fire until you do. They'll do it if I order them to. Or else I'll go away and leave them alone!"

Brett saw stark panic intensified in the eyes of Cable's victimized admirers. To be abandoned by him meant a death of horror. If Brett failed, they would obey any order he gave. Brett shrugged again.

"Naturally I'm going to try to make the machine work," he said scornfully. "I want to get Miss Hunt back to normal time, and these poor devils too. But I doubt if you intend for me to join them."

"Right!" said Cable between grinding teeth. "You are quite right. I don't. Come get to work."

CHAPTER III

Murderous Despot

PROFESSOR CABLE, Dr. Harry Brett and Laura Hunt walked along a street which was like a nightmare. It was recognizably Park Avenue, but only because of the iron-railed grass plots in the center. Their footsteps echoed hollowly upon the pavements. They passed frozen gray shapes on the sidewalk—once a man alone, startlingly perfect as a sculpture in gray stone, but horrible because he was not stone at all. At a little distance he was terrifying because

there were no shadows anywhere about him. As he was left behind he appeared to merge into the mist as if withdrawing from substance to become a wraith again. Once they passed a stout woman and a child. Then three young girls together, with trimly-shaped legs—and no shadows.

There were cars in the roadway, too, and they seemed to be mere convolutions of the mist until one drew near. Then they were sardonic mockeries. It seemed as if all this world of gray mist were some gigantic mockery. Fog formed into stone as one drew near, and reverted into fog as one went on.

But the gray shapes were not stone, but human beings petrified in time. And the definite fact that this was Park Avenue was ironic, too, because these humans were faintly luminous, the mist was luminous, and the feeling was that of walking in the maliciously amused dream of a dreary, silent demon. All appeared to be unreal because of the lack of shadows. All appeared ghastly because everything glowed of its own light. Everything reeked of a stilly gray horror because of the deathly silence and the mist.

Professor Cable turned off Park, and led along a twisting route they could not identify. They did not speak. Cable seemed to be filled with an almost overmastering fury. To a man of his rabid vanity, who had demonstrated that he was a fool, the unforgivable insult was to call him a fool before his victims.

He turned, suddenly, and led the way up two low steps, turned again, up two flights of stairs, and unlocked a heavy door. He struck a match and lighted candles. As their light grew, the room's interior changed from a featureless gray cavern to a rather musty small workshop. It might have been the shop of a model-maker or of someone who constructed specially designed bits of hand-made jewelry. There was a sturdy safe in one cor-

ner. On a workbench by a foot-power lathe and drill, there were various metal parts.

"Here's where I've worked," rasped Cable. "I've built two extra nullifiers, from beginning to end, because I couldn't find anything wrong with the ones I had. But they work no better."

He brought his hand out of his pocket. It held a squat pistol.

"I'm going to lock you in here," he announced savagely. "The window is barred. I'll bring you food. You can't break down the door. I've made everything ready for you. There's one of the nullifiers. It will bring things to our time-rate, but it won't send them back to normal. Find out what's the matter."

He ground his teeth with anger.

Brett, looked at the familiar object on the bench. It wasn't chromium-plated, as he'd made them, but that should make no difference. Cable's device was merely a small brass case with a control-switch on it—Brett's models had had the switch at the end of a small flexible cord—and a length of flexible field-cable. Inside the case there would merely be a very simple electronic circuit—without tubes, however—a pair of condensers, and two oddly-shaped bits of metal which actually generated the nullifying field and which determined the direction in which the field operated. Very little energy was required, astonishingly little. Brett suspected that this machine actually simply produced a condition in which the static energy of mass converted itself into the kinetic energy of time-velocity. But now he only glanced at the nullifier.

"Find out what's the matter and then you'll kill me," he said drily. "Of course! Two men mustn't know how to make these things. It's too dangerous. But I'm going to try to kill you too, Cable. I mention it [Turn page]

because you don't dare kill me, yet."

Cable snarled savagely as he backed out of the door, his weapon held ready. The heavy door closed. The lock clicked. Then, with somehow the effect of frenzy, the door thumped as two heavy bars went across it top and bottom.

Brett picked up one of the candles and held it to the window.

"Barred, all right," he said to Laura Hunt. "I think I can depend on him, too, to have made sure I can't cut through the walls or floor, even if I can put them in a time-rate where it's practical to try. Let's look at this nullifier."

BRETT sat down at the work-bench and carefully opened the brass case containing the electronic circuit. He looked almost cursorily within. He pursed his lips and whistled soundlessly. Laura Hunt moistened her lips.

"What's going to happen?" she asked. "I still feel as if this were a dream, a terrible nightmare."

"It's worse than that," said Brett. "And if Cable gets back to normal time with a nullifier that will work both ways, it's going to be worse still. He'll be able to abduct any girl or murder any man on earth, and leave no trace. With his mania for superiority my guess is that he'd wind up trying to terrorize the world into accepting him as—heaven knows what! Emperor, maybe."

"He couldn't!"

"He could make a good try," said Brett grimly. "There's one trick he could pull which would come close to destroying cities. In fact, he could literally wreck a nation. I hope he doesn't think of it."

Then he said "Mmmh!" He was looking in the case of the nullifier. Deliberately he put the cover back on. He looked at a rack of little-used tools over the work-bench. He glanced underneath at a row of flasks, such chemicals as a man doing much soldering and perhaps a little electro-plating would have in his shop. He swung the field-cable around them and threw the switch. Then he worked with them for half an hour, arranging an odd combination of chemicals in one of the flasks. Once he paused and picked up a scrap of paper, looked at it, and put it in his pocket.

He set the flask aside, picked up the nullifier, and removed the switch from the case. With a curiously rueful expression on his face, he spliced on a section of flexible lamp-cord and connected the switch on the end of that. He checked connections and turned to the girl.

"Would you stand there a moment, Laura?" he asked her casually.

She moved to the spot he indicated, her eyes questioning. Then, quite suddenly, he vanished from her sight. She started violently.

"Sorry, I didn't think," he said suddenly, from behind her. "This thing works."

"What do you mean?"

"You stepped in the field and I turned on the machine," he told her "You went back to normal time, frozen, immovable, like everything in normal time. Then I brought you back."

"No! I hadn't any sensation of that," she answered him anxiously.

"You weren't in normal time long enough to have any sensations," said Brett curtly. He was obscurely busy with the nullifier. He seemed almost to be wrestling with the cable.

"Can we return to the normal world, then?" asked Laura desperately. "Can we go before he comes back?"

"You were back," said Brett. "And I brought you here again. So could he. I'll send you back when I can make you safe, but I won't turn that lunatic loose with a really good mass-nullifier! I've got to jump him—"

There was clattering of the bars of the door. Laura caught her breath. Brett moved like lightning. He spilled liquid from one of the flasks onto his handkerchief. The pungent reek of ammonia came into the room. He thrust the cloth into her hand. Swiftly he leaned closer to speak into her ear.

"Cable was listening all the time through the door," he whispered. "Hold this over your nose. Be ready to rush."

The bars rang loudly as they clattered to the adamantine floor, outside. The key turned. Brett picked up the flask in which he had arranged chemicals with such care. He shook it and held his thumb as a stopper over its neck.

The door swung wide and Cable stood in the opening. He seemed to tremble with triumphant hate. His weapon bore on Harry Brett.

"So you'll jump me, eh?" he raged. "You've fixed a nullifier, so you'll jump me, eh? But now—"

The flask in Brett's hand made a tiny hissing noise. His thumb was white from the pressure with which he held it down. Now he released it. There was a tiny, indescribable sound and a jet of faintly greenish-yellow vapor shot out. It struck Cable's face. Instantly his features contorted with agony.

He flung himself backward. His pistol went off with a noise which sounded like the crack of doom in the awful stillness of the city.

"Come on," said Brett in a strained voice. "Cover—your face!"

HE SEIZED Laura's hand. He thrust her past Cable who was twisting and choking. He pushed her forcibly down the hallway. The pistol roared again, and it seemed that the explosion would crack their ear-drums. Then for a third time the gun thundered.

Brett's body jolted from the impact of a bullet. But he shoved Laura to the stairway and ran after her down the steps. They clattered on while horrible noises came from above.

"Chlorine," panted Brett. "I figured he'd be listening outside the door. That's why he left you with me—so I'd talk. The ammonia protected you, and I held my breath. Too bad the gas kept me really from jumping him."

They reached the ground-level. They raced for the open air. They fled into the gray mist. The pistol roared from a window over their heads. But Cable was strangling even as he tried desperately to kill them. The chlorine gas that Harry Brett had made from sal-ammoniac—for soldering—and the sulphuric acid used for cleaning small castings, must have caused his lungs to feel as if they were on fire. It was unlikely that he had got more than a whiff of the strangling stuff, but he would not breathe easily for an hour or more. This was the reason Cable had missed Brett and Laura with the revolver, and continued to miss them, though he fired at them desperately until his pistol was empty.

Brett led Laura this way and that until it was quite hopeless for anyone to try to follow them. Then he stopped. He was a gray, featureless figure in the world of gray mist. Laura was another. He pulled a flashlight from his pocket and turned it on himself. Instantly he was flesh and blood again.

"He nicked me with one of his bullets," he told her grimly. "I couldn't stop before, but I'm bleeding a little. Take this handkerchief and bind it up, will you, Laura?"

He was bleeding a great deal, but by tying the bandage tight around his arm, she managed to staunch the flow of blood. Then she stood still, biting her lips.

"You need a doctor for that," she said.

"We'll manage," said Brett. "I don't think the bullet hit a bone. It's going to hurt

presently, though."

They were somewhere in the middle of a wide expanse of clear asphalt. The silence was awful. It was such stillness as no human being ever normally experiences. Not only the people and the subways and the traffic were still. The breeze was still. Not even pigeons fluttered above the streets. There were not even insects. There was no sound at all.

"I suppose he's got the machine you fixed," Laura said. "Now he'll go back to normal time and leave us here to die!"

"That's what he thinks," said Brett, grinning. "But—look!"

Brett then showed the girl the object he had carried away from Cable's workshop, concealed beneath his coat, with the heavy rubber-covered wires wrapped around his waist. It was the Time Nullifier.

"Let's see if the Professor can laugh that off," said Brett.

CHAPTER IV

Brett's New Device

FOLLOWED by the girl, Brett led the way along a crosstown street until they came to the docks. The water below them was motionless in smooth ripples. It resembled glass. Brett tossed a coin from his pocket, and when it fell on the water, it bounced and rang loudly.

"We don't need to worry about a ferry or a bridge," he observed. "The river's frozen more solidly than it ever could be frozen by cold."

They explored a great warehouse. In the watchman's office they found a lantern. Brett produced his nullifier and brought the lantern into accelerated time. The lighted lantern gave the interior of the office an appearance of reality, and its rays disclosed a watchman's lunch-box. Brett looped the field-cable about that, too, and turned the switch. There was a thermos flask of coffee, and sandwiches. Laura devoured one hungrily.

"I'm beginning to have hope," she admitted. "If that wound of yours isn't too bad, we may be able to make out all right."

"I'll do," said Harry Brett.

But the wound was painful. Horribly painful. The bullet had gone through the muscle just below Brett's elbow, and had possibly glanced off a bone. It had not broken the arm, but Brett had lost a great deal of blood.

He began to feel the injury as the numbing effects of the shock wore off.

They found a ladder leading down to the water. They descended, and, with a lighted lantern between them, started to walk across the Hudson. Brett knew Cable had not the slightest chance of finding them, once they had taken refuge in the warren of houses on the New Jersey side of the river. But they found their surroundings weird to the extreme. As the mist closed in behind them, there was no object of any sort to give the impression of a material world. The lantern made the surface of the water look normal, and impossible to walk upon. They seemed to be suspended above a gulf of liquid into which they ought to sink. The rest of the universe was gray mist.

They walked, and walked, and walked, over the slippery frozen waves. After a long time Harry Brett found himself wabbling from weakness caused by the loss of blood. The hot coffee had helped, but he had been badly weakened.

"I thought that we could keep in a straight line by noticing the—ripples," he said with an effort. "They'd give us a direction since we can't see anything. But now we are lost."

Laura slipped her hand under his arm. It sent a stab of pain through him. He gasped. She put her arm about his waist and sturdily strove to help him that way. She did bear up a great deal of his weight. But they went on endlessly.

"Stop and rest," he panted presently. "Listen! If we can't find shore, together, you take the nullifier and go on. Sooner or later you'll reach land. If you—have to go, don't try to find me again. No hope of that. Just find some hiding-place. Some place Cable and his gang would never think of searching. Slum, maybe. Put the cable in a circle—stand inside—and throw the switch. If they don't find you, you'll be all right. You'll be back in normal time. Cable's trouble was that he didn't realize that the design of the nullifier-case was—part of the apparatus. Its shape helped form the field. When he—put a switch on the case instead of on a cord he changed the capacity constants. With the extension-cord and the switch on the end, it's the—way I designed it. . . ."

"I won't leave you!" cried Laura fiercely. "Maybe I can help!"

The lantern slipped from her grasp. It fell to the solidified surface underfoot. It cast queer shadows.

"Hold it," said Bret sharply. "Look! The shadows. That's the—wake of a boat! If

we follow it, we can get on board."

The possibility seemed to put new strength in both of them. They struggled for fifty yards more. For a hundred. The frozen eddies of the wake grew larger and more turbulent. Then they saw the boat which had made the froth. It was a gray shape upon gray water in a gray mist. It looked rather like something carved out of ice. It looked unspeakably desolate.

But when the rays of the lantern shone upon it, it lost its appearance of ghostliness and changed back to honest planks and solid unitidness. They saw its name, "Sarah J. Loomis, N. Y."

IT WAS doubly difficult to make the last few yards to its side. The otherwise mirror-smooth surface of the river was here heaved up into great, rounded, glassy mounds, over which they slid horribly. But at long last they reached the side of the tug, and Brett put out the last remnant of his strength, and Laura pushed his bulk desperately. He reached the deck.

The door of the cabin was open. Laura tremblingly adjusted the field-cable about the bunk. Its blankets and mattresses ceased to be frozen and immovable, and became soft and inviting. She helped Brett to the mattress. He almost collapsed upon it.

"Now," said Laura resolutely, "I'm going to see what I can do for you."

She left the lantern burning in the cabin. She went away with a flashlight and the nullifier. In twenty minutes or so she came back with water. Hot water. And towels. And antiseptic.

"I'm an expert with the nullifier now," she said cheerfully. "And on a boat they have everything. There's an oil stove, and the machine made it work, and water in a tank, and food in an ice-box. I opened that. When I've re-banded that wound of yours, I'll fix something to eat."

They stayed on the tug for a period of which there could be no measure, of course, but which must have been equivalent to days. Laura was tireless in helping Brett. At first he grew feverish and horribly weak. He repeated his instructions to her in case anything should go wrong.

"But Harry, after all, with the nullifier as you've fixed it, we can both return to normal time," she said anxiously. "We're not likely to be found here."

Brett shook his head grimly.

"My life's not important enough to be saved that way. Listen, my dear! Cable is so vain he's almost a maniac. Now that he's

trapped in this—this eternal now, he's apt to go literally crazy from disappointment. Do you realize what he could do?"

Laura nodded, her features pinched.

"He could abduct people, as he did those poor friends of his. But if you have to have a doctor, and can't help it, I don't see why you should bother."

"That's not the point," Brett told her. "It's a matter of radio-activity. Radium has a half-period of about two thousand years. Uranium's is infinitely longer, five times ten to the ninth—five billion years. Suppose Cable wanted to get even with the normal world in which he never cut a figure? Suppose he brought radium into accelerated time? What would happen? It's always three degrees hotter than its surroundings. It's always giving off heat. Suppose its time-rate were accelerated so that its half-period became a fraction of a second of normal time?"

"There's not much radium," Laura said faintly.

"Not much would be needed for damage. Figure the result if radium were brought into this time. To us, it would simply become deadly to handle. But in the normal world, if it took a full second to disintegrate, its temperature would go up to about three billion degrees, and iron turns to steam at three thousand. It would be literally one million times hotter than necessary to vaporize iron. Metal, stone, and even bricks would turn into incandescent vapor, which would give off cosmic and X-rays fierce enough to burn and maim for heaven knows how far, and would expand or explode with a violence beside which TNT would be a zephyr. But I think," added Brett grimly, "that our time-rate is faster than that. I don't think it would take a whole second for radium to destroy itself and everything around it."

Laura shivered.

"Or he could use uranium," said Brett more sternly still. "It might not seem as bad. But where there are milligrams of radium there are tons of uranium to be had. If he brought a mass of it into our time it might not create an explosion in normal time. It might disintegrate at what would seem a leisurely rate. It might take a year to destroy itself. But even a milligram of radium is nothing to play with, and this would be two thousand times as deadly. Do you know how much a milligram is? If you crush three aspirin tablets and divide the powder into a thousand parts, each part will be a milligram. A milligram of speeded-up uranium would make a nearly incurable burn in a fifth of a second, and there could be tons of it! If

Cable put masses of that stuff about New York, nobody could approach it. No metal shield could stop its rays. Its radiation would make the very air radio-active, so that a hundred miles away you might breathe in poison which would sear your lungs. The same radiation would sterilize human beings whom it did not kill, and milder doses still would cause mutations or human monsters if babies were unlucky enough to be born!

LAURA twisted her hands together. "I see," she said slowly. "You can't risk that!"

"No, I can't! And once I return to normal time I can never come back to this instant unless I'm dragged back. If I stay in normal time a single second—how many years of this time would that amount to? I have to stay here and fight Cable!" Then Brett's face became stern and implacable. "I'm stronger now. I'll be up—well—we'll call it tomorrow. I've designed a new nullifier which will take you and itself back into normal time, and then fight any other nullifier that tries to bring you back here. Get back to normal time with one of those around you, and you'll stay."

He did get up the next day, though there had been no faintest change in the gray silence about the motionless tugboat. He found a workbench down in the engine-room and worked there, with what metals and tools he found and brought into accelerated time. The members of the crew came to be familiar, standing like the naturally painted statues the Greeks were so fond of. Once, as he worked, he grinned and turned to Laura.

"I feel like I know these men," he said drily. "They've been standing around so long. It's funny that they'll never know me. I hope some day to pay them back for what we're doing to them."

"Doing to them?" asked Laura, puzzled.

"We're robbing them," said Brett ruefully. "We have to. And they're going to be very badly puzzled. For instance, there's the stove. You've brought it into our time. The cook in the galley had merely turned his back to it. When, in normal time, he turns back to it—why—it will have been rusting in this time for several centuries. It will seem to him to have fallen into a heap of rust while he looked the other way. The bunks we've rested on—we had to make the blankets and mattresses soft—won't have blankets or mattresses when they look at them. There'll be only a little fine dust there. The ice-box will be simply a pile of rust-scales and cobweb, and what food we don't

use will be simply a fine powder so long decayed it will have no odor at all. I hope to pay for this damage, but it's going to bother them. And I do hate to spoil these tools, but I need them!"

He was making two miniature nullifiers. When they were finished he tested them, and then carefully added the devices which would automatically counteract the field of any other nullifier which essayed to bring them into accelerated time.

Six meals later—as good a way of measuring time as any—he had altered the larger nullifier in the same way. He had Laura put one of the miniatures on herself. Only the cable showed, and it was not conspicuous. She could reach the tiny switch with ease.

"Now we invade New York," he told her. "As soon as we get ashore, Laura, and on solid ground, you go down into a subway station or into a phone booth somewhere, and go back to normal time. Now Cable can't bring you back to this time-rate, even if he finds you. I'll go on and attend to him!"

But Laura smiled. They were in the cabin of the tug.

"My dear!" she said with soft eyes. "Do you think I would?"

"Why not?" demanded Brett. "What else do you propose?"

"Why, I'm going to stay with you!" said Laura fiercely. "After I've known you this long, and nursed you when you were hurt, do you think I'd desert you when you were going into danger?"

Brett tried to frown at her, and failed.

"I didn't think you'd be so obstinate," he admitted. "Hmmm. You're safe, though. Throw that little switch and you go back to normal time and neither Cable nor I or anybody else can drag you back. So you can—escape me if you like. But I'm trying to guess what you'll do if I—kiss you."

He moved close to her. He touched her shoulder lightly, smiling down at her. She swayed toward him a little, her eyes shining.

Time really stood still before they separated.

"Now, I wonder why I didn't guess that, either," he said. "Come along, girl! We've got to wind up Cable so we can run down to the City Hall—in normal time, my dear—and attend to some business."

They left the tug behind them. They moved through the mist toward the New York shore. At long last they found it, and made their way up from the river's surface. Brett's first idea of finding a place to work in Jersey City had been altered by the discovery of the tug. It had turned out to be

a lucky accident as he had been able to use tools in the machine-shop which he might not otherwise have chanced upon.

"First we must go to that building on Park Avenue where Cable hangs out and learn what's happened," Brett said to Laura when they reached the street level. "We must also see what's happened to his friends."

LAURA looked puzzled. "But how do you know which building on Park Avenue it was, Harry?"

"The address was on a doormat at the bottom of the stair-well. I was using a flashlight freely then, you may remember. A swank apartment-house. No name. Just an address."

He threw a flashlight on a street-sign so that the numerals would show out through the gray luminosity of all objects. Then they knew where they were. They walked briskly. Harry Brett now had in his pocket a revolver which he had found on the tug, and Laura was more adequately protected, but insensibly the atmosphere of gloom and of horror affected them. The blank-windowed, shadowless buildings, and the mist, and the silence. Especially the silence!

"I'm frightened!" said Laura, under her breath, presently.

"We're there," said Brett in a low tone. "This is the door."

They went cautiously within the gray, glowing cave which was now the appearance of the foyer they had last seen lighted by candlelight. Now there was nothing. But they heard a noise. Somewhere, a woman was sobbing hysterically. It was a low-pitched, throaty gasping which grew higher and higher until her throat seemed to close. Then there was silence, and then it began again and went on, monotonous and uncontrollable. There was despair in those sobs, and horror, and something like mounting insanity.

Harry Brett switched on his flashlight. It shone through the open inner door and illuminated the figure of the lushly beautiful red-haired girl, Ruth, the girl reporter. She was bound cunningly in a chair so that she could not move hand or foot. With the beam focused upon her, she seemed the only real object in a world of unsubstantial dream-stuff. Her eyes were wide and fixed. Her features were drawn into the ultimate expression of horror. She sobbed again.

When the flashlight fell upon her, she shrieked. And instantly from all about her there burst a bedlam of cries and sobbings. It was sheer pandemonium, the inarticulate

outcry of a dozen voices. Harry Brett's flashlight swept from side to side. He saw the rest of Cable's coterie. All of them were wrapped in ropes until they were like cocoons. Only their heads emerged. Their faces now almost were the faces of mad men and women. They cried out at Brett, screaming at him, cursing him hoarsely, gasping at him, or else pleading in voices which would have melted a stone.

Laura shrank close to the young scientist. The unholy tumult made his flesh crawl. He shivered. Then he turned his flashlight on himself.

There was a sudden, stark, incredulous silence. Then the tumult broke out again. But its tone was utterly different, if no less desperate.

His fingers shaking with a sick rage, Brett struck a match. There were candles everywhere. They were not burned out. They had been extinguished only after these poor folk were rendered helpless, so that they would have only the gray twilight about them and so that they would see each other as gray and unhuman images—and so that they would go mad with the horror of their situation. Cable had left them here to suffer, as punishment for having witnessed his humiliation at his own and Brett's hands.

Brett set to work to free the nearest prisoner. When the first victim could complete his own release, Brett went on to the next. The red-headed girl fainted dead away as she tried to arise from the chair in which she had been bound. Laura lighted more candles until the room was once more ablaze with light. Toward the end of the task of releasing them, Brett spoke to them jerkily.

"I've found a way to return you to normal time," he told them grimly. "It's permanent. Cable will never be able to drag you back to this time again. But I need some help. He can do enormous damage if he isn't caught. Who'll help me catch him?"

But these men were half-crazed and utterly broken by the terror they had been through. They babbled hysterically, ignoring the call for volunteers. They only pleaded desperately to be returned to the normal world again.

In the end Brett bunched them all in the middle of the room, crowding them as closely as possible. He put the field-cable of the modified nullifier—modified at the tugboat's work-bench—around them so they would all be within its influence. Its action could not be reversed—not until they were in normal time, nor until they reversed it themselves. But by the time they had taken one breath in

normal time every object or living thing left in accelerated time would have turned to dust or crumbling oxide.

"Now listen!" said Brett savagely. "There's something you've got to do as soon as you get back. You want to get out of this building, of course. You may have trouble explaining how you got into it." He looked them over, and they were too nerve-racked to be moved by anything but terror of the eternal now. "But," went on Brett, "though Cable's device can't bring you back out of normal time, because centuries will have elapsed here before you finish drawing a breath, this machine could. Therefore, as soon as you're back, smash it! Stamp on it! Batter it flat! Wreck it! Don't neglect to do what I tell you."

They babbled desperate promises, and they were in such awful terror of return that they probably would obey his orders.

Then Brett pressed the button of the switch.

CHAPTER V

A Score Is Paid

A DEAD silence ensued. After the babbling, it was as abrupt as a blow. The motley group was frozen in the midst of gestures and sobs and nerve-racked grimaces. They had been returned to a normal time-rate, and they could not be drawn back to this time-rate by Cable's present instrument. Brett had an instant's weary amusement over the thought that they would never admire any other scientist. The red-haired girl, Ruth, would be so hysterical in her aversion to even the memory of this experience that it was unlikely that she would ever write any news account of it. But there were still important details to be wound up.

"Cable's still loose," said Brett bitterly. "He must have thought that you and I went off to hide somewhere and use the machine I'd repaired. He thinks we're back in normal time ourselves. So he avenged himself on the people who'd seen him defeated, and he'll try to get even with the world for his own despair. Perhaps he is hunting for us. If he thinks of bringing radium or uranium to this time-rate it would wreck the world."

"What are you going to do?" asked Laura. "Find him!" said Brett, more savagely still. "I'm going to take you to the office where we were being introduced when all

this began. I'm going to see you back in normal time, and then I'll hunt up Cable. If I ever find him, I'll come back to normal time. If I don't find him, I hate to think what it'll mean."

He shrugged.

"Do you suppose he could be at that little workshop?" Laura asked.

"We'll see first," said Brett. "I picked up a letterhead on the workbench. Maybe it's the address."

It was. They went through the gray mist and the dreadful city. They located the doorway, two steps up, climbed stairs, and found the door which would open, and the bars which could convert the workshop into a prison. There Brett made a light and bitterly regarded what he found. He pointed to the scrapings of rubber insulation and to bits of clipped-off wire.

"There's proof that I'm a fool," he said savagely. "He knew I'd solved the problem of returning things to normal time. He heard me tell you so. So when we got away and he failed to kill us, he looked at the scraps where I'd worked. Oh, how dumb I was! He found bits of wire and insulation. He knew I'd added a flexible control to his nullifier, and it could only have been to restore the switch to its original place in the design! So he's tried it in his turn!"

A savage fury filled Brett. It was like a furious remorse, because if Cable could return to normal time, now, he could make more nullifiers and enter a new ghostly world at any time to commit inconceivable crimes with impunity. In the last analysis this would be Brett's fault, because he had first devised the mass-nullifying apparatus.

Brett groaned. Then Laura caught his arm.

"Harry! What's that?"

There was a sound in the dead city outside; an actual sound in the clamorous stillness. It was a humming sound, faint at first.

"Good grief!" said Brett. "A car!" He listened incredulously. "That's it! He figures we're back in normal time. Now he can go back when he pleases! So he's punished everybody who saw him licked, and—you see? He'll load up a car with loot and drive it somewhere out of New York, most likely. He'll return to normal time a hundred—two hundred miles away! I've got to get him now! You're all right! Go to your uncle's office and throw that switch."

Brett threw the last words over his shoulder as he plunged out of the workshop in which first he, and then Cable by studying the evidence of the work he'd done, had

solved the problem of leaving the world where time stood still. He raced through the gray mist, dodging the ghostly motionless figures which were people.

The noise of the car grew louder, died down, and grew louder still. Brett knew, of course, the logical place for Cable to go. To the place where he had left his victims, because they had gathered riches for themselves. It would be literally the one place where he could add most of his loot with the least trouble. And of course, to a man with the maniacal vanity of Cable, there would be the added attraction of proving to them their own exceeding stupidity and his wisdom. . . .

BRETT halted short of his destination, his jaws taut and the revolver from the tugboat out and ready in his hand. He waited grimly. The car stopped. He heard Cable get out, invisible in the mist. He heard the car-door slam. Habit is so strong that, although believing himself the only living person at large on an entire planet in the Eternal-now time, Cable had closed the car-door behind him. He marched into the building. Brett saw the dim, yellowish glow of his flashlight. Savagely Brett moved forward.

To cut off Cable's escape, Brett went first to the car. He opened the door and fumbled for the ignition-key. It was gone. Habit had made Cable take it, before getting out of the car. Brett used his own flash to make sure. Yes, the key was gone. But the back was loaded with loot—and there was a nullifier on the front seat! Cable had been using it to gather his loot, but here and here alone he would not need it.

Brett took the nullifier away from the car. He knotted its field-cable over his shoulder. Then he heard a sound from inside the building. He could picture it in detail—Cable stunned to see candlelight flooding the foyer once more when he had left his victims in the gray twilight alone, Cable creeping cautiously to see where his prisoners had been left to go mad in hopelessness, to find the ropes strewn on the floor and the men and women in unmistakable stasis, in iron-hard immobility, returned to normal time-rate, and then Cable frenziedly trying to work the nullifier he could see so plainly with its field-cable encircling the group. He could not stir it, of course. Brett heard him cry out in his rage. He almost bellowed. Brett heard him curse horribly.

Then, an instant later, he came running and raging out of the street door. It is most likely that he meant to get his own nullifier

from the car, to fetch back his victims one by one and wreak upon them an insane vengeance for outwitting him. The point at which vanity merges into insanity is hard to find. The only offense anyone had committed against Cable was the discovery that he was a fool, but that offense had driven him to maniacal cruelty!

"Hold it!" snapped Brett coldly, from the mist. "Put up your hands!"

Cable gasped. Then he roared in crazy wrath. The gray mist was split by gun-flashes. An automatic pistol roared itself empty. Cable swerved in his running and rushed toward Brett's voice. Brett fired. Cable stopped short. He had come to have an implicit belief that only he possessed weapons. Brett fired again, though not to wound.

"You're going to drop that gun," said Brett harshly, "and put up your hands!"

Cable screamed with impotent rage. It was unearthly to hear such a cry from human lips. It echoed and reechoed from all the tall towers hidden in the twilight. Then Cable turned and plunged for the car. Brett fired yet again. Glass tinkled from a car-window.

"I only need an excuse to kill you," raged Brett. "Stop!"

The car-starter whirred. The motor caught. Cable must have moved like an uncannily precise automaton in the midst of all his passion, to have put in the key and turned it without fumbling. Gears clashed. The car roared into motion. Brett ran toward it. It rolled away.

He emptied his revolver after it, but it vanished in the mist. It turned a corner. He heard its brakes squeal, and then it roared on, and turned again. He heard its sound go away and away, headed north on one of the wide north-and-south avenues. Even a man in a passion of outraged vanity and terror could thread the motionless traffic. The car turned west. If it reached the Hudson Drive, it could go on for hundreds of miles, and pursuit would be useless and discovery impossible. And if Cable did not miss the nullifier from beside him—and with all the interior of the car a shadowless gray luminosity he was not likely to—he might go on and on until his gasoline went low and he needed more. Then he would seek out a tank-truck, or another car from which he could siphon fuel. In either case he would need the mass-nullifier to make the gasoline a liquid. And then he would discover that he had no nullifier.

Brett felt sick. But then he heard Laura

calling desperately in the gray silence.

"Harry! Harry!"

He moved toward her.

"I'm all right," he said unsteadily. "You heard the shots?"

"Did he shoot you?"

"No, but he's dead," Brett lied quickly. "Don't come here."

HE WENT quickly toward the sound of her voice. She appeared in the mist. She clung to him.

"I was afraid you'd been killed," she sobbed.

Brett kissed her and firmly led her away.

"We're going to your uncle's office," he said evenly. "We'll turn the switches of our two nullifiers there."

Then he stopped suddenly. He slipped Cable's nullifier from his shoulder and put it on the ground. He crushed it under his heel. He stamped it into uselessness, into a merely cryptic mass of battered metal. Then he fumbled at the next corner and dropped it into a street-drainage opening. It was in accelerated time, and if it should ever be found in normal time it would be after thousands of millions of years of its own time-rate's rusting. It would be merely a lump of oxide, which no one would think of examining.

He led the way on again. He was haunted by the knowledge of what was bound to happen somewhere a hundred or two hundred miles away, in this time-rate. Cable would discover that his nullifier was gone. He would have a car, almost out of gasoline, and probably millions of dollars in money and gems. But he would have no food or water, and there would not be one drop of water or one morsel of food anywhere on earth that he could use.

He might find his way into towns, and into groceries and fruit-markets, and feel food and drink beneath his fingers. He might cast a light upon it and look at it. But he could not stir it. He might try hopelessly to walk back to New York, because there might be crumbs remaining where he had left his victims to die. But he would never make it. Somewhere, sometime, stumbling through a gray mist, he would fall from weakness and not be able to rise again. . . . And—well—in normal time someone might notice a little heap of dust and a few fragments of rotted bone, but it would not be conspicuous. Nobody would notice a hopelessly oxidized watch or other trinket, so far gone in rust as not to be recognizable. . . .

Brett hoped Laura hadn't heard the car

in flight. If she ever mentioned it, he would try to persuade her that she was mistaken. Because there was absolutely nothing that could be done now. Nothing whatever.

"I pick your uncle's office to go back to normal time in, because we'll make less fuss turning up there than anywhere else," he said, in an attempt at a conversational tone. "When Cable's friends turn up, in a state of nervous collapse, in somebody's drawing-room, it is going to make talk. But what we want is to get quietly down to the City Hall and get married."

She stopped, and he kissed her.

"And then, I've something to do. I've a new line to work out on those mass-nullifiers."

"No!" she said fearfully. "Once we're back in normal time, you mustn't ever touch one again."

"This will be different," he told her. "While I was laid up on the tug, I figured out a way to regulate the amount of mass one would take out of a substance. I think I can put a thing in any time-rate I want. And radium or uranium would be deadly at a time-rate approaching infinity, like ours, but if we could choose a half-period of five hundred years, or one hundred, why, that would be power! Atomic power! There'd be no reason to worry about the exhaustion of coal and oil, then."

She stopped again. Again he kissed her.

"And I'd like to make some money," he told her humbly, "because I want to give you things. Also I think I ought to pay for the damage Cable did with the nullifiers I invented. That will run into pretty big sums. And I'd like to put up a monument to him. Poor devil! He threw away his life trying to be a great man. But if he's responsible for my solving the problem of atomic power, why not a monument to him?"

"You nice, foolish darling!" said Laura, tremulously.

They went on. They went into the office

of Laura's uncle, the office of Burroughs and Lawson in the Chanin Building. Laura laughed shakily.

"Let's stand as we are," she said with a little catch in her voice.

They stood as they had been. Days and weeks ago—or maybe it was the thousandth of the thousandth of a second—Laura's uncle had said, "And Mr. Brett, this is my niece, Miss Hunt." And they'd shaken hands, and as their hands were clasped, everything began.

NOW they clasped hands again, smiling at each other.

"Contact!" said Harry.

They threw over the switches of the two irreversible nullifiers at the same instant. . . .

There was sunlight. There were colors. There were noises. There were smells in the air. The world was alive around them. They stood in a perfectly normal office, on a perfectly normal afternoon, in a perfectly normal world. A typist was at work in an adjoining office. An elevator-door clicked. There was a deep humming noise in the air, which was the city itself, vividly alive and in motion.

"—My niece, Miss Hunt," said Laura's uncle, comfortably. "I think she'll be inter—"

He stopped and gasped. Because his niece—a very well-behaved young woman—walked straight into the arms of the young man to whom she had just been introduced—whom she had first laid eyes on not more than a minute before. She clung to him, and put up her face to be kissed, and caught her breath in something suspiciously like a sob of joy.

"Harry!"

Dr. Harry Brett kissed her hungrily and then spoke with an air of extreme earnestness and satisfaction.

"We'd better hurry," he said. "Come on! The marriage license bureau closes at four o'clock. We don't want to be late!"

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

WRITING in in the nick of time from his astrogated retreat from the din and clamor of urban civilization at Beechhurst, New York, Murray Leinster sends us an explanation of one factor in **THE ETERNAL NOW** that has had editors tearing their hair out in large divots.

This business of how humans deprived of mass would react to gravity and the all-around



deceleration of movement around them is a tricky one to say the least—and Murray's explanation of the apparent normal that results in his swell novel is perhaps a trifle more involved than the problem itself.

But Leinster is a pseudo-scientist to beware of—this warning is for those of you who delight in ripping helpless authors to shreds in **THE READER SPEAKS**—and one who can, as his explanation below will reveal, talk the atomic cuticle off a corundum rocket ship landing strip. So beware.

However, since no human has ever been so demassed and lived in known history, it seems to us that we will have to accept Murray's explanation as given in this column and keep our fingers crossed in hope that he is right. Take a look at it and see what he has to say.

I don't know how "The Eternal Now" got started in my head. I like to putter around with ideas, turning them inside out and upside down. For instance, I'm planning a story now, based on the fact that everybody has read about men seeing sea-serpents, but nobody ever wondered how a sea-serpent would feel if he saw a man. (Editor's note: This

story, "De Profundis" has been written and will appear in an early issue of THRILLING WONDER STORIES.) And I suppose one could have fun with a snake that saw a man with delirium tremens.

Anyhow, "The Eternal Now" came out of such messing around with ideas. Everybody knows that mass and energy are theoretically interchangeable and that one's time-rate—rate of experiencing events, metabolism, etc.—is somehow tied in. At the speed of light less—say—one-twenty-thousandth, one's mass would be practically infinite, and one's sensation of time passing would be so slowed that only seconds would seem to pass in what to a more normal world would seem centuries.

So I began to wonder what would happen under exactly reversed conditions, near-zero mass and the necessarily associated accelerated time-rate. Since there is no readily imaginable "negative speed," I had somebody invent a mass-nullifier to bring about the theoretically connected conditions.

One thing annoyed me a lot. One of the most interesting of the consequences of nullification of mass couldn't be expounded in the story because it would have slowed things up. The people in "The Eternal Now" walk around quite normally, although it might seem that they couldn't, if the acceleration of gravity is fixed at 32 feet per second.

It would seem that if they let go of something they could never detect its fall, could not fall themselves, etc. But I think they could. Because the acceleration of mutual attraction varies as the inverse square of the distance (of course) and in proportion to relative mass!

A man falls toward the earth at 32 ft. sec. acceleration,—but the earth also falls toward him .0001 x minus God-knows-what feet per second. The point is that acceleration involves the storage of energy as velocity in a falling object, and as momentum. The greater the mass, the greater the storage of energy. There has to be mass for there to be inertia.

If there is no inertia, there can be no momentum, no storage of energy—and no resistance to acceleration, hence no limit to the rate of acceleration by gravity. If you picture two objects in space and reflect that their acceleration toward each other is divided in proportion to their mass, and then imagine one having practically no mass, though subjected to the same attractive force—why, there you are. The result of all this involved reasoning is that the people in "The Eternal Now" would notice nothing odd about gravity—except that it seemed to be normal. Sincerely—Murray Leinster.