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*Gravity, shmavity, how do you make
it pay off? Not, certainly, by ap-
proaching . . .*

THE IMPROPER AUTHORITIES

AS SOON as Ronald Flecker fully convinced himself that he had discovered in his eccentric aunt's cluttered basement a small battery that stored the force of gravity instead of electricity—a battery that held in complete essence the power of fuelless space-flight, levitation, and any number of lesser marvels—he sat down to do some very serious thinking.

The discovery had come about while he was repairing his aunt's doorbell—one of the innumerable small tasks she hesitantly but in the end always rather firmly set him, although she had more than enough money to hire professional household mechanics, and that Ronald in any case always felt obliged to discharge in return for the

privilege of sleeping over her garage. He had found the thin wires in a monstrous tangle close under the dusty rafters. It turned out the system wasn't even worked by a step-down transformer but by dry cells and some idiot had hooked up the cells in parallel rather than series, accounting in large part for the doorbell's feeble performance. His aunt recalled that the last person before Ronald to revive the doorbell had been the kindly but abstracted and rather smelly Dr. Yorn, the second-to-last in her unending series of spiritual counselors—a yogi, medium, hypnotist, dynamic psychologist, something like that. Mrs. Wycherly liked variety and versatile men. Dr. Yorn's successor, the gleaming-eyed and dap-

per Mr. Espy, seemed equally obliging and would almost certainly have been willing to tackle the doorbell, but now Mrs. Wycherly had Ronald for those things.

Ronald had picked out the three freshest looking dry cells, setting the other two, which still had short bent lengths of wire untidily attached to their terminals, down on the scarred top of an upended trunk beside the stepladder on which he was working. It was still day outside, barely, although of course he had a flashlight to see up into the cobwebby rafters, and just as he'd about connected up the three newer looking cells properly, working a little gingerly because of his apprehension of spiders, a beam of yellow light from the setting sun struck brightly through one of the low oblong windows and across the top of the trunk. It showed a lot more dust motes trembling in the air than Ronald's flashlight revealed, and immediately Ronald felt a sneeze coming on. But then it showed something so much more strange and arresting that the sneeze never came and Ronald quite forgot that his nasal passages had been tickling.

One of the rejected batteries carried attached to one terminal a length of gray-insulated wire so sharply curved that its other end now chanced to touch the other terminal, shorting the battery out—except that the battery had looked to Ronald too dingy and old to have any juice left to short.

The dust motes were whirling in orderly circles around the wire, forming a dim tube that curved from terminal to terminal with the wire running down the center or axis of the shadowy tube. The circular orbiting of the dust motes was clearest within an inch of the wire, but even as he watched he saw some of the more distant motes begin to take up the movement, swinging in larger, slower circles.

Ronald's face grew blank with attention. He leaned down very slowly until his eyes were only inches from the phenomenon. Fearfully, almost reverently he blew softly at the wire. The motes eddied away wildly and then almost immediately began to resume their circling, those nearest the wire taking it up most quickly, then those further off starting once more to join in.

Ronald thought: *There's a*



At the approach of Mr. Espy, a startled Ronald saw the battery lift right out of his hands.

force moving those particles. They're in a force-field. If they were powdered iron or black iron oxide (but they aren't) it would be a magnetic field moving them, a magnetic field created by an electric current moving through the wire, though I think it would have to be a lot stronger current than a dry cell could furnish.

But the particles aren't iron or iron oxide (too heavy to float in air, besides this has to be just Wycherly basement dust—ashes, lint, earth, powdered wood and paper) so it can't be a magnetic field that's moving them, though they're moving exactly as if they were in a force-field of some sort. So it has to be gravity . . . a gravitic force-field they're moving in, at least that's the only other force I know of it could be.

An electric current moving through a conductor creates a magnetic field.

A what?-current . . . call it a gravitic current anyway . . . though it could be a magnetic current . . . a gravitic current moving through a conductor creates a gravitic field.

The sunlight faded swiftly. As the yellow beam moved upward, dimming, its last rays showed more and more

dust motes pouring into the vortex, joining in the frenzied yet orderly circling.

As the dark basement twilight closed in, Ronald reached out and grasped the battery protectively, possessively. With his other hand he bent the wire away from the terminal. Already he had begun to worry about the battery running down.

A minute or so later it occurred to him to use his flashlight to examine the battery more closely. It was a distinctly smaller cylinder than the other dry cells, he saw now—only about five inches high and an inch-and-a-half in diameter—and it had no cardboard sheath around it, which had been the chief reason he'd thought of it as older and more likely to be completely exhausted than the others. And the terminals, although of the screw-on, knurled-nut type, didn't seem to be brass, but something grayer, like the zinc, or whatever it was, of the battery's body.

He tried to force himself to think in a systematic way about the possible source of the thing, granting that it really *was* a gravity battery—something that another part of his mind was already working out delightful ways

to check. *Let's see, he thought, it could be a genuine gravity battery manufactured as such by human beings engaged in secret government-sponsored anti-gravity research either in this country or elsewhere—there are such projects—though then how it should get into Aunt Wycherly's basement seems to require very weird assumptions. Or else—my God, this gets fantastic—it could come from off this earth and have been manufactured by extra-terrestrials—got to consider every possibility—though that involves us in even more weird assumptions.*

Or it could just have happened. I mean the battery could have started out as an ordinary battery, but sitting here in Aunt Wycherly's basement and undergoing all sorts of rhythmical temperature changes and God knows what else, the chemicals in it could have been transformed into substances generating a current—gravitic, magnetic, how should I know what jargon to use?—that in turn creates a gravitic field. Like spontaneous combustion, or something. Old rags. That's not unusual.

Or it could all be illusion or freak air currents.

Or I could just be going

nuts—that's something to keep in mind too.

But while Ronald was making his brain hammer out these possibilities, another section of his thoughts was darting around like kittens to investigate all sorts of wonderful ideas, making use of the thirty years' rag-tag accumulation of information in Ronald's mind—a quite remarkable and varied assortment. For one thing he was thinking that since this basement phenomenon behaved so much like magnetism, it must be a dipolar gravity field he had here, promising both positive and negative gravity if properly harnessed; that is, not only gravitic attraction but gravitic repulsion—in other words, antigravity, the secret of rocketless space-flight! There were ways to check that, of course. And what *was* the wonderful stuff that flowed through the wire and made the field grab and the motes spin? Gravitic fluid, could you call it? Liquid gravity? Was it particles, like electrons? Gravitrons, would you call them? Hell, nobody really understood electricity yet! Still—

"Ronald, why are you taking so long? Mr. Espy will be coming soon and I don't want

to have to watch for him at the window."

Ronald looked down at his aunt's pudgy, thin-lipped face, realizing that she had come creaking and clumping all the way down to the basement without his being aware of it. He nodded slowly at her without a word, put away the battery he was holding, and like a man in a dream began to make the last connections in the bell system.

The bell rang strongly at the first test. Mrs. Wycherly thanked Ronald profusely in the kitchen and seemed on the point of bringing up some additional matter, but just then Ronald rather abruptly wandered off toward the garage, still acting like a man in a dream.

Mrs. Wycherly made a little humorous face. She'd been debating giving Ronald two dollars for his labors and had almost decided to, but if he chose to go mooning off that way . . .

She was still wondering, too, why he had so carefully put one of her batteries into the inside breast pocket of his coat, buttoning the coat afterwards. It was almost like a psychiatric symptom, with some deep symbolic meaning—perhaps she should ask Mr. Espy about it. But no, Ron-

ald probably just wanted it for something in the garage. Well, she wouldn't grudge it to him, though of course he ought to have asked her first.

Convincing himself that his find really was a gravity battery occupied Ronald most of the night and next day. He made his tests with great care, only after thinking each through in detail first, he kept them as few and brief as his delight and wonder would let him. The possibility of the battery running down had begun to prey on his mind more and more seriously, especially after a search of the basement next morning revealed no more dry cells of similar appearance.

The chief test, or rather set of tests, involved making a coil of the wire joining the terminals, so as to give direction and greater power to the gravitic field, exactly as one would do in making an electromagnet. The most obvious and interesting cylinder around which to wind the coil was the battery itself. Ronald started out with just a dozen loops, winding the wire down the body of the battery from one terminal and returning it through the air to the other.

The result was more than gratifying. *Held terminals-*

end-up the battery almost doubled in weight as soon as he connected the coil. Of course he was just judging the weight by feel, but he was sure he couldn't be fooling himself to that degree. Moreover, the coils strained toward the floor in that position, tending to creep along the cylinder and bunch together. (In later tests he made a point of anchoring them individually with adhesive tape.)

Held terminals - end - down the battery weighed almost nothing at all. It seemed as light as if it were a painted balsa-wood model of itself. The transition from twice-weight to no-weight, as felt by his hand, was as mysteriously alarming and delightful as a mild electric shock.

Clearly the gravitic field was dipolar as he'd surmised. The terminal-end was the negative or repulsive pole, seeking to push away from the earth—or push the earth away! The other end was the positive or attractive one. (A bit later he discovered what he told himself he should have guessed at once: that if he wound the coil the opposite way, say clockwise instead of counter-clockwise, it reversed the poles—they really had nothing to do with the loca-

tion of the terminals on the battery.)

For light objects nearby, the battery's tiny gravitic field was more powerful than that of the earth—a circumstance that shouldn't surprise him, Ronald reminded himself, as earth's center of gravity was 4,000 miles away while the battery's was right in his hand. The attractive pole would snatch a cork off the floor from the height of two feet—he could actually see the cork falling upward faster and faster—while the repulsive pole would bat away the same cork dropped on it from above. And the attractive pole always became covered with dust when used, while the other pole stayed clean.

Brought close to his forearm, the repulsive pole made a shallow, saucer-shaped dimple in the flesh, while the attractive one tugged at the tissue in a way that somehow felt deeper than suction.

It was vastly exciting to say the very least, and Ronald could hardly wait to step up the power of the field by increasing the number of turns in the coil—this being one of the times when his delight and wonder got the better of him.

However, he retained at least minimal prudence and added only six turns. He told himself that if the effect wasn't enough, he could always add more.

He was glad that he had been conservative. The repulsive pole was downward when he touched the return wire to the second terminal, and the battery tugged his hand sharply upward, as if it were, not a small, but say a *medium-size* bird trying to escape. Or maybe a weather balloon. The sensation was peculiarly delightful — his hand was not only tugged but indescribably tickled (presumably by the curving components of the dipolar gravitic field)—and despite his concern about the battery running down, it was all Ronald could do not to stand there all night holding the up-surging battery with a happy, dazed smile on his face.

And in fact Ronald did not disconnect it right away. He'd got the impression that the wire of the coil had changed color in some way and on an impulse he switched off the light he'd been working by, a hanging and unshaded 150-watt globe (which he kept secret from his aunt, for she had a thing about wasting electricity and kept nothing

stronger than 40 watts in her whole mansion).

The consequences were sudden, spectacular, and almost disastrous.

In the darkness the coil was outlined in bright white light.

Ronald was so startled that he opened his hand.

The white-spiraled battery sprang upward and for an instant Ronald had the dreadful fear that the thing had got away from him forever, and from the earth too, although he knew very well that the ceiling of his garage apartment must stop it.

But then almost immediately, without touching the ceiling, the thing flipped over, dove down, and hit the floor with a sharp crack.

Its light went out.

Ronald's feelings were intense and mixed. He was relieved that the battery hadn't escaped, doubly relieved to discover that apparently it couldn't escape from earth—that released repulsive pole down it would simply flip over and dive. (There was the possibility that he had started the battery flipping over with a twist of his hand when he released it, but that possibility didn't bulk large in his mind.)

And of course, beyond all else, he was fearful that the fall had somehow ruined the battery forever. For instance, if its ability to generate gravitic energy depended on some rare and delicate spontaneous chemical transformation that had taken place inside it, then even something as slight as a sudden jar might well reverse the transformation.

He switched on the light and picked up the battery as if it were a wounded bird. He was considerably relieved to find that the wire had jarred loose from one of the terminals. He reconnected it, the battery surged in his hand, and his relief was complete.

But thereafter his carefulness was doubled and also tainted with suspicion.

He made a number of other interesting discoveries about the battery besides the epiphenomenon of the white glow. For instance, it turned out to be the *insulation* on the wire that carried the gravitic current. A bare copper wire didn't work at all. A nylon cord worked beautifully, provided he wrapped it in tinfoil so that it didn't short itself out. In fact, there seemed to be a half dozen new sciences implicit in the battery and Ronald would have liked noth-

ing better than to spend the next six months in investigating them all, provided he had a dozen batteries to work with, or even just one to hold in reserve.

That was the fly in the ointment, of course. His battery was goose and golden egg rolled into one, a bird in the hand but none at all in the bushes. So about the middle of the next afternoon he sat down to do some serious, really serious thinking—meaning of course thinking about how he could use his great discovery to profit himself.

First he carefully locked away the battery and went out into the garden to meditate it through, but he found he couldn't bear to be that far away from his find, so he went back to his garage apartment and sat beside the window that looked into the garden, feeling a little giddy from lack of sleep.

His aunt had noted his abstracted and somewhat agitated behavior, however, from one of her lace-curtained watch-windows, just as she'd early that morning been aware of him poking around in the basement without her permission. She frowned, remembering his distinctly odd behavior with her battery. She hadn't discussed the mat-

ter with Mr. Espy yesterday but she decided she certainly would tonight.

Serious thinking is always apt to be a somewhat chilling business. The more Ronald applied his mind to the problem of how to make *money* out of one small and presumably irreplaceable gravitic and antigravitic battery, the chillier the prospects came to look to him.

One thing he was fatalistically certain of from the start: that if he reported his find to any "proper authorities" (military, scientific, industrial, academic, governmental—authorities are always governmental to the end) he would get nothing whatever for himself except trouble. To begin with—the governmental authorities would know very well whether one of their secret projects had or had not started to manufacture gravitic batteries. In either case they would grab the battery—either for safekeeping or for feverish secret research into its mysteries—and at the same time loudly proclaim that it did not exist. Ronald's protests would be laughed at. He would be left out in the cold or, more likely, grabbed himself and awarded a lifetime of protec-

tive custody and unending interrogation. Where a discovery of such fabulous military importancee as antigravity was concerned, an individual's rights just wouldn't count.

Perhaps he could investigate the battery himself, carefully open it and find out what made it work? Ronald's reaction to this idea was simply to shudder. True, he fancied a bit his talent for scientific thinking, but he wasn't *that* egotistical. Cutting or prying the battery open in hope of discovering its secrets struck Ronald as some seven degrees more unpromising than an infant taking apart a gold wristwatch to find out what made it work. This seemed particularly to the point as Ronald now inclined more and more to the theory that the battery was something that had been spontaneously generated in his aunt's basement by complex cycles of temperature change or the like—which also brought him back once more to the fact that he only had *one* battery, that as far as he knew there was only one on Earth. And if *that* were the case, why the chances were that the properest scientific authorities in the world wouldn't be any too successful in probing the battery's

secrets. They'd play with it—at a little more sophisticated level than himself, to be sure—until its power gave out, and then dissect it into microscopic slides and peer and poke at it, and like as not end up knowing little or nothing more than at the first testing.

These general considerations also made Ronald shy away from the plan of finding and privately enlisting the services of some brilliant young technician or engineering student, or offering such a person a partnership in the battery.

Perhaps he could *sell* the battery? No, any substantial businessman would be fearfully suspicious of such an offer. He'd think it was the Keeley motor over again or some perpetual motion crank or the powder that added to water makes gasoline. Ronald could arrange brilliant demonstrations, of course, but the more brilliant they were the more his prospect would suspect trickery. Experts would have to be called in and he would be back once more with the proper authorities, who would be snatching at his battery with rapacious fingers.

Suppose he were to find a millionaire gambler and bet him that—Ronald irritably

shook his head. In the first place he didn't know any such gamblers or how to approach them and in the second place the last thing a Bet-a-million Gates would bet on was something that looked like a cast-iron certainty to win. The maker of such a tempting offer would be bound to have something up his sleeve.

Maybe he could use the battery to put on a magic or spiritualist act? Causing something to float without wires, or levitating small objects in a slightly darkened room for the edification of wealthy crackpots like his aunt—do the Poltergeist bit. Now that, Ronald told himself, was cutting his problem down close to size. The trouble was, of course, as with so many other plans, that the battery would eventually run down and probably sooner than later. But more than that, the magic-act plan ran up against the objection that Ronald simply wasn't even a passable third-rate showman or conman and knew it very well.

Sitting in his chilly hole-over-a-garage and gazing out at the darkening garden—for a full twenty-four hours had passed since his great discovery—Ronald gave an irritated little sigh. His utter incapacity as a showman and conman was an old sore point with him.

Why, as long as ten years ago he'd been the one to get his aunt interested in occultism, but had he reaped any of the benefits of her craze? No! That had been reserved for the slick operators like Mr. Espy, Dr. Yorn, and their dozen or so predecessors. They'd taken hundreds, thousands of dollars from her over the years. She'd even sent money by mail to Tibet, Ceylon and Southern California "to further occult research," while he, who'd started the whole thing, was lucky if from time to time he got a few cans of corned beef hash or spaghetti from her pantry hoard!

Not that Ronald lay awake nights scheming how to murder his aunt without being suspected or how to defraud her on a large scale. He wasn't that sort of person at all. He just grieved occasionally that a man with a commanding gaze and a confident pseudo-professional manner should be able to charm a twenty-dollar bill out of someone else's pocket and into his own, while he, with ten times the education, ingenuity, and honest idealism, couldn't!

Now if I just had the kind of cheap ability that a Yorn or an Espy has, Ronald told himself, I'd figure out a dozen childish simple ways to

profit from this battery and, what's more important, I'd have the nerve and know-how to put them into action.

He shook his head and shivered. He'd just had a vision of himself, days or months hence, the battery completely dead, finally going to the "proper authorities" with a crazed gleam in his eyes and assuring them that, yes, once this battery had held gravitic energy . . .

What I obviously need, he told himself, is an improper authority.

His gaze lit on Mr. Espy and his aunt talking at the far end of the garden. Almost at once his aunt went inside and Mr. Espy lit a cigarette and began to stroll.

Normally Ronald was anything but a man of action, but sleeplessness and desperation had transformed him. He grabbed the battery and completed the connection. It glowed brilliantly and surged powerfully upward in his hand, the coil consisting now of some twenty turns of tinfoil-wrapped nylon. Ronald headed for the garden.

Strike while the iron is hot, he told himself exultantly. Espy's my man. With this to show him and let him feel it won't take me twenty seconds

to make my pitch. And with his conning ability and my battery . . .

Ronald certainly did make an arresting sight as he hurried through the darkening garden, holding high his glowing hand. Mr. Espy stopped dead and stared at Ronald.

There was something peculiar about the stare, though. It seemed to Ronald to go through him like a knife. Intending to startle, Ronald found himself startled in return . . . momentarily almost paralyzed.

He realized with horror that the battery had sprung from his limp fingers.

He waited for it to flip over and crash, thanking God that the ground was soft.

It didn't flip over. Buzzing faintly now and seeming to spin, it bulleted straight upward at ever-increasing velocity, one more bright point of light headed toward the first stars of evening.

It faded and was gone forever.

Ronald realized that Mr. Espy had hold of his shoulder and was shaking him.

"Young man!" Mr. Espy was saying, "Do you realize that you possess astounding occult powers? That was the most impressive demonstration of telekinesis I have ever

witnessed in a long and rather far-flung life!"

Lieutenant J. C. Arnold and S. Abramson, USAF, were on a routine jet mission at 30,000 feet when the phenomenon shot by them at a distance of only a few yards, its velocity now considerable.

"Jack, a meteor!" the second gasped.

"Be your age, Sammy," the first admonished him. "Would a shooting star shoot up?" He paused before adding, "But what could it have been?"

Rather later that evening Mr. Espy was preparing a sort of telegram for transmission, though not by Western Union. It read in part:

You will also be pleased to hear that the last of the batteries the saintly Yorn absent-mindedly distributed around in his chuckle-headed way before he was reassigned to a less critical post, has been located and safely disposed of. It is no longer on Earth. One worry less for all of us! To get it away painlessly from the young human who had discovered it and was beginning to probe its more superficial powers, I was forced to employ what on this planet

they quaintly called "the whammy." He was most startled and considerably grieved to see the battery star-trend, having apparently not anticipated all the consequences of the gyral effect or the cube law on the coils. I calmed him and reconciled him in part to his loss without having to wipe his memory.

So . . . our observation station on Sol Three is once more reasonably secure from discovery. It will not be necessary now to find new patrons—we can continue to depend for local financing on Mrs. Wycherly and the other ladies who unknowingly but so very kindly support our little enterprise.

THE END