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THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

By POLTON CROSS

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This is the story of a man accursed, of one human being in multi-millions who did not get a fair chance. In a word, I am a sort of scapegoat of Nature. I resent it—bitterly, but there is absolutely nothing I can do about it.

Back and forth from past to future, like a human pendulum, oscillates Dick Mills—while others watch in sheer horror!

My name is Richard Mills. I am dark, five foot eight, and my age is—well, that's part of the story. But for the sake of convenience let's say that I was thirty-two when the horror started.

It's odd, you know, how you don't always appreciate the onset of something enormously significant. I should have guessed that there was something wrong when, from the age of fifteen I often found myself mysteriously a few hours ahead of the right time without knowing how I had done it. I should also have attached suspicion to repeating actions I had done before. But then all of us have felt that we have done such-and-such a thing before and so, like you, I didn't think any more about it.

Until the impossible happened!

I had just left the office at 6:15 p.m. I was then clerk to a big firm of lawyers. In the usual way I took the elevator to the street level and went outside. The October evening was darkening to twilight and the lights of New York were on either side of me as usual, climbing into drear muggy sky.

I remember singing to myself as I swung along. Another day over, Betty to meet, and a cheery evening ahead of both of us.... But I did not keep that appointment. Because, you see, I walked into something which was at once beyond all sane imagining.

One moment I was streaking for the 'bus stop—then the next I was in the midst of a completely formless gray abyss. It had neither up nor down, light nor dark, form nor outline. I was running on something solid and yet I couldn't see it, and it was just when I was trying to imagine the reason for this sudden fog that I found myself still running down a broad highway I had never in my life seen before!

I slowed to a standstill and cuffed my hat up on my forehead as I looked about me. The street had altered inexplicably. It was not gray and dirty but highly glazed, as though the road surface were made of polished black glass. The traffic too was strangely designed and almost silent. There were no gasoline fumes—I noticed this particularly. In general the buildings were much the same, only shiny on the facades and somewhat taller.

And the lighting! It was still night but instead of the usual street illumination there were great elliptical globes swinging in midair somehow and casting a brilliance below that had no shadows. Everything had the pallid brightness of diffused daylight.

"Anything the matter?" a pleasant voice asked me.

I turned sharply as a passer-by paused. Until now I hadn't noticed that the men and women passing up and down the sidewalk were rather odd in their attire—the women in particular. The absurd hats, the queer translucent look of their clothes, the multicolored paints to enhance their features. Still women—eternally feminine—but different. And now this stranger. He was tall and young with pleasant eyes and the most amazingly designed soft hat.

"I noticed you hesitating," he explained, passing a curious but well mannered eye over my attire. "Can I help you?"

It surprised me to find anybody so courteous.

"I'm just wondering—where I am," I replied haltingly. "This is New York, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Wall Street?"

His look of surprise deepened. "Why, no," he said. "You're on Twenty-Seven Street. Don't you remember that all street names were abolished ten years ago to avoid duplication?"

I could only gaze at him fixedly, and he gave a slight smile.

"Look here, you're mixed up somewhere," he said, taking my arm. "It's a part of the city's 'Lend a Hand' policy for us to help each other, so I'm going to make you my especial charge. Incidentally, the 'Lend a Hand' policy is a good idea, don't you think?" he asked, forcing me to stroll along with him. "It's done away with a lot of the old backbiting."

"Oh, surely," I agreed, weakly. "But look here—er—what sort of cars are those? They're very quiet."

"You mean the atom-cars? Say, where have you lived? And if you'll forgive me, that's an awfully old fashioned coat you've got on. I know it's a breach of courtesy but I'm curious."

I dragged to a stop and faced him directly.

"You won't credit this," I said. "But only what seems about ten minutes ago I was running down Wall Street for an ordinary gasoline-driven 'bus. Then I ran into a fog, or something and—suddenly I was here!"

"It would be ill mannered for me to disbelieve," he said slowly, regarding me. "Yet I am puzzled. It may help you if I explain that you are in New York City which was resurfaced with plastic in Nineteen Fifty-Eight. The present date is October the twelfth, Nineteen Seventy-One."

1971! Twenty-five years! Great Goeffrey!

Somehow I had slipped a quarter of a century ahead of my own time of 1946. You can think of such things but you dare not believe them. Yet hang it, it had happened!

I had no opportunity to ask my genial friend anything more for he was blending into the returning gray mist, and I was back again in that blank world where nothing is, or ever was, that world which is outside time, space, and understanding. I stood wondering and fearful, waiting.

This time I sensed that the interval was longer, but when the mist evaporated it revealed that I was back again in familiar Wall Street, only I had moved some two hundred yards from the bus stop—or, in other words—the precise distance I had walked with the stranger!

I blinked, mopped my perspiring face, then glanced up at a nearby clock. It was 6:20, the exact time as when I had started to run for the bus. I had left the office at 6:15—five minutes to get down the street ...

Had my other adventure taken up no time whatever?

By an effort I pulled myself together when I saw one or two passers-by looking at me curiously. I had to think this one out—maybe talk it over with Betty Hargreaves since apparently I still had time to meet her.

But she never arrived to keep the appointment. Finally I rang up her apartment. It was only after the storm with her had subsided that I realized I had arrived back in the same place on the following evening—twenty-four hours later!

I smoothed things over with her as best I could, said I had been sent out of town on urgent business, and we promised to meet at the same time and place the following evening. I didn't add, "I hope," even if I felt like it.

Troubled, I began a contemplative wandering through the city, heading in the general direction of my rooming house.

I never reached it. To my alarm I once more found myself sailing into grayness, and there was nothing I could do to avoid it. My last vision was of a distant lighted clock point to 11:15. Then it was gone, and I was helpless, baffled,

frightened.

Amid this gray enigma all sense of direction, time, and space vanish. I found it safest to stand still and wait until it cleared. It did so eventually and I discovered I was lying in bed in a quiet little room with a gray oblong of window revealing the night sky.

Puzzled, I stirred restlessly and reached out a hand for the bedside lamp. When I scrambled out of bed and looked down at myself I got an even bigger shock.

I had the figure of a boy of seven years! I was just as I had looked at seven!

With a kind of automatic instinct I went to the dressing table and stared at myself in the mirror. There was no doubt about it—I was a child once more, in my own little bedroom at home in Washington. My parents must be asleep in the next room, but somehow I didn't dare go and look. Yet had the memory of everything I had done up to the age of thirty-two!

Impossible! Idiotic! I had grown backwards!

Returning to the bed I threw myself upon it and struggled to sort the puzzle out. But gradually that impalpable mist came creeping back and I left the world of my childhood, wandered for a while in blank unknown, and then emerged into the street from which I had disappeared....

The first thing I saw was that lighted clock ahead. It was still at 11:15. Presumably I had once again been absent exactly twenty-four hours—and I had traveled twenty-five years backwards, even as on the other occasion I had traveled twenty-five years forwards.

Can you wonder that I was sick at heart, perplexed? It appeared then that my intervals in "normal" time lasted about five hours—or to be exact 4 hours 55 minutes. Queer how I cold-bloodedly weighed this up. I felt like a visitor who has only five hours to stay in a town before going on his way.

When I encountered a police officer presently I asked him what day it was, and his rather suspicious answer confirmed my theory of a twenty-four hour absence. I got away from him before he ran me in and went straight to Betty Hargreaves' apartment. Fortunately she had not yet gone to bed, and she eyed me with chilly disfavor when we were in the lounge.

"I suppose I cooled my heels because you had urgent business again?" she asked, going over to the sideboard and mixing me a drink. "I've got a telephone, you know. You could have told me!"

"I'm sorry about that appointment, Bet. I just couldn't keep it. I—er—" I hesitated over the right phrasing—"I sort of keep coming and going."

"You're telling me?"

She handed me my drink and raised a finely lined eyebrow. Betty is a pretty girl, a slim blond with eyes which are really blue and hair which is really golden. But when she looks annoyed—whew!

"I never heard of a financier's chief clerk coming and going as much as you do," she commented presently, sitting down on the divan beside me. "What's happening, Dick? Is there a merger on, or what?"

"No. It's—er—" I put the drink down and caught at her arm. "Bet, I need help! I'm in one gosh-awful spot."

"Money, or a girl?" she questioned drily. "If it's money, I can help you out. Dad didn't exactly leave me penniless. If it's a girl, then let's say good night and thanks for the memory."

"No, it's neither," I said. "It's so hard to explain. You see, I—I keep seeing the future and the past!"

Be it said to her everlasting credit that she did not even blink. She just gazed, as one might at a lunatic, a baby, or a dipsomaniac. And while she gazed I talked, the words tumbling over themselves. I told her everything and when I had finished I expected her to laugh in my face. Only she didn't. Instead she was thoughtful.

"It's mighty odd," she said seriously. "And because I know you haven't a scrap of imagination and are too gosh-darned honest to lie for no reason, I believe you. But it's creepy!" She hugged herself momentarily. "And what are we going to do about it?"

"We!" Bless the girl! She was on my side.

"I dunno," I muttered. "So far as I can estimate I am allowed five hours to live like an ordinary man, then off I go! I don't know if a doctor could explain it, or maybe a psychiatrist."

"Hardly a doctor, Dick." She shook her fair head musingly. "It isn't as though you've got a pain. It's more like an illusion. You might do worse than see Dr. Pembroke. He's a psychiatrist in the Hammersley Trust Building. I know because a cousin of mine went to him for treatment."

I made up my mind. "I'll see him at the first opportunity. It won't be in the morning because I expect I'll be veered off again at about four-fifteen in the small hours. When I can catch up on normal working hours I'll see what he can do for me."

For ridiculous conversation this probably hit an all time high, yet so sure was I of the things which had happened to me and so staunch was Betty's loyalty, we might have been talking of the next gridiron match. Anyway she was a great comfort to me and, when I left her around 12:30, it was with the resolve to master my trouble when it came upon me again.

I went home to my rooms, learned from a note under the door that my firm had telephoned to inquire what had happened to me, and then I went to bed! Funny, but I wasn't tired in spite of everything, and I must have gone to sleep quite normally.

But when I awoke again I was not in my bedroom, though I was in pajamas.

It took me several minutes to get the hang of an entirely new situation. I was lying on my back on closely cropped and very green grass. The air was chilly but not unpleasantly so. The sky overhead was misty blue with the sun just rising. I judged it was still October, but extremely mild.

As I stood up I got a shock. A small group of men and women—attired so identically it was only by their figures I could tell any difference in sex—was watching me. Embarrassed, I stared back at them across a few yards of soft grass. Then I was astonished to behold the foremost man and woman suddenly float over to me with arms outstretched on either side. They settled beside me. They had silver-colored wings folded flat on their backs.

"I know," I sighed, as they appraised me. "I've no right to be here and I'm in the future. All right, lock me up. It won't make any difference."

The man and woman exchanged glances and I had the time to notice that they were both remarkable specimens—tall, strong, athletic-looking, with queer motors strapped to their waist belts from which wires led to the wings on their backs.

After a good deal of crosstalk I found out that they belonged to the local police force, made up of an equal number of men and women, and that I was of course both a trespasser and an amazing specimen to boot. This time, it appeared, I had slipped ahead not twenty five years but two hundred!

Were I a literary man, I suppose I could fill a book with the marvels I discovered, but here it is wisest policy to sketch in the principal advancements. I learned that their amazing system of individual flight had led to the abolition of ordinary aircraft; that they had conquered space, mastered telepathy, overcome the vagaries of the climate, and completely outlawed war. Yes, it was a fair and prosperous land I saw in 2146.

In the end they locked me up for examination by their scientists, but of course it did them no good for as time passed I faded away from the prison cell and was back again in New York, still in my pajamas, in the middle of a street, and—I soon discovered—at 4:15 in the morning! Once again, twenty-four hours had elapsed since presumably I had vanished

while asleep at 4:15, twenty-four hours before.

To be thus thinly clad on an October early morning is no picnic. I took the only sensible course and presented myself at a police station, told the sergeant in charge that I had been sleep-walking and had just awakened. I was believed and I got shelter. After borrowing a suit of clothes I crept home to my rooms in the early dawn hours.

Now I really was getting frightened! If this were to go on—good heavens! I did some computing and figured that I had until about 9:15 in the morning before I'd take another trip, so before that time I must see Dr. Pembroke. It was unlikely that he would be at his office so early, unless the urgency of the reason were stressed.

I rang up Betty, told her what had occurred, and asked her advice. She suggested that I tell Pembroke over the 'phone at his home what had happened, and try to get him to be at his office before nine. She promised to be there, also.

Dr. Pembroke did not sound at all enthusiastic at first, but he warmed up a trifle when I went into explicit details. Finally he seemed interested enough to agree to be at his consulting rooms by 8:45. So it was arranged.

Promptly at quarter to nine I was there with Betty, very serious and determined, beside me.

Grant Pembroke was at his office promptly on time. He was a tall, eagle-nosed man with very sharp gray eyes and a tautly professional manner. He ushered us both into his consulting room which was equipped with rather overpowering looking apparatus, and then switched on softly shaded lights and motioned me to be seated in their immediate focus. Betty sat in the margin of the shadows.

"So, Mr. Mills, you keep imagining you float away into the future and the past at regular intervals, eh?" he asked slowly, settling down and fixing me with those piercing eyes.

His scepticism caused me to grow even more earnest.

"I don't imagine it, Doc—it actually happens," I told him. "And in about fifteen minutes it should happen again, then you'll see for yourself."

"*Mmmm!*" He made a brief examination of me as though he were a medical man, then sat back in his chair again and put his fingertips together. "And while you are away, twenty-four elapse here?" He asked the question thoughtfully.

"That's correct, yes."

"Do twenty-four hours elapse in the place you—er—visit?"

"No. It varies a lot. The only definite timing I've noticed is that on the last occasion I leaped two hundred years ahead instead of the former twenty-five."

"Just so, just so. A most interesting sidelight on Time."

"I don't want to be an interesting sidelight!" I protested fiercely. "I want to live like any other man, marry the girl I love, and keep my job. As things are I am in danger of losing them all. This sort of thing is unthinkable!"

"*Mmm*, just so," he agreed. "But there is the other side, you know. We are dealing with a paradox of Time that has so far only been a theory and never proved. You may have the good fortune to be that living proof."

I could only assume that he had queer ideas on what constitutes good fortune, and so I kept quiet. For another long minute he studied me, then turning to his desk he began to scribble something down on a scratch pad. He also made calculations and a drawing that looked like a plus sign with a circle running through it. I was just about to ask him the purpose of this doodling when things happened—once again.

Even as I felt myself drifting into gray mist I noticed the electric clock stood at exactly 9:15; that Betty and Pembroke had jumped to their feet in stunned amazement.

Then off I went. And this movement was backwards in Time, not forward....

When the mists cleared, I was seated on a wagon, driving a horse in a leisurely manner along a winding country road. I saw I was wearing rough breeches and a flannel shirt, while a hot sun was blazing down on my battered straw hat. A yokel? A farmer? A pioneer? I had never been any of these things so far as I could remember—yet here it was!

Glancing inside the wagon I saw a woman and a boy and girl asleep, and far behind my wagon were many more of similar design kicking up a haze of dust across the desert.

I had to work discreetly to find out what was going on, and very astonished I was to discover that my name was Joseph Kendal, and that the three in the wagon were my wife and two children. We were heading for Georgia, which had been settled by General Oglethorpe a few years previously. In other words the General had fixed Georgia as he wanted it in 1732, and this—according to my wife—was 1746. We were changing our domicile, every one of us. But all that this signified to me was that I had dropped back two hundred years even as before I had gone ahead for a similar period.

I scarcely remember what happened while I was there. It seemed to be one endless trip across the desert with all the old pioneering flavor about it. I fitted into it without any effort. Everything I did seemed reasonable and natural. Secretly I was rather sorry when it all had to come to an end just after sunset and I was in the gray mists of Between, Beyond, or whatever it is....

I returned to normality seated in that same chair in Dr. Pembroke's consulting room. He was opposite me, looking very weary and untidy. Betty, who had apparently been half asleep in the chair on the rim of the shadows, jerked into life as I sat gazing at her. I glanced round and noticed two white-coated nurses and two men who looked like scientists.

My eyes moved to the clock. It registered 9:15 and, judging from the window, it was daylight.

"Twenty-four hours to the minute!" Pembroke ejaculated, getting up and coming over to me. "Upon my soul, young man, you didn't exaggerate. We've been waiting, and waiting, ever since you disappeared from view. I summoned the nurses in case of need, and these two gentlemen here are scientists with whom I've been discussing your problem."

"The point is: have you got the answer?" I asked irritably.

"Yes, yes, indeed," Pembroke assented, and the two scientists nodded their heads in grave confirmation. "But," he added, "it is rather a grim answer."

"I don't mind that," I said. "Can I be cured?"

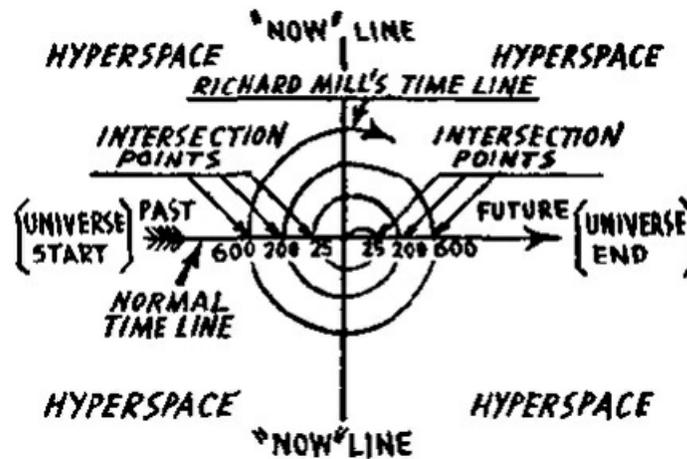
They were silent. I set my jaw and glanced helplessly at Betty. She could only stare back at me, tired from the long vigil, and I thought I saw tears in her eyes as though she were trying to control an inner grief. At last I looked back at Pembroke.

"Tell me what you have done and where you have been," he instructed.

I did so. "Well, let's have it!" I finished bitterly. "What is wrong with me?"

He hesitated. Then going over to his desk he handed me a sheet of paper on which was a curious looking drawing, the finished effort which I had seen him commence just before I had evaporated. The drawing looked like a plus sign.

The horizontal line was marked "Past" at the left hand end, and "Future" at the right hand end. Where the vertical line intercepted it in the center was the word "Now." This same "Now" was also inscribed at top and bottom of the vertical line. So far, so good. Now came the odd bit.



Dr. PEMBROKE'S ROUGH SKETCH

Starting from the exact center of the plus sign was an ever widening curve, just like the jam line inside a Swiss roll. You know how that line circles out wider and wider? Well, that is what it looked like, and of course it inevitably crossed the right hand section of the horizontal line marked "Future," and the left hand line marked "Past."

So I sat staring at this drawing which looked as though it had come out of "Alice in Wonderland" as Pembroke started speaking.

"Young man, I don't want to be blunt, but I have to," he said. "You are a freak of nature! Every human being, every animal, every thing, is following a Time Line through space, and that line is straight. You may recall Sir James Jeans' observations on this in his 'Mysterious Universe?'"

I shook my head. "I never read Jeans."

"Mmm, too bad. Then let me quote the relevant statement on page one forty-two from the Penguin Edition." Pembroke picked up the blue covered book. "He says—'Your body moves along the Time Line like a bicycle wheel, and because of this your consciousness touches the world only at one place at one time, just as only part of the cycle wheel touches the road at one time. It may be that Time is spread out in a straight line, but we only contact one instant of it as we progress from past to future.... In fact, as Weyl has said—"Events do not happen: we merely come across them." End quote."

"And what has this to do with me?" I demanded.

"Just this." Pembroke returned the book to his desk. "Your Time Line is not *straight*. It operates in a circle, like that circular design you see there. You told me that, in earlier life, you noticed you were unaccountably late sometimes and unusually early at others?"

"Ye-es," I agreed, thinking. "That's right enough."

"That," Pembroke mused, "can be taken as evidence of the first aberrations in the Time Line you were following. Now it has taken its first real curve. Instead of progressing normally in a straight line you are carried into hyperspace—that gray mist you have mentioned—which is non-dimensional, non-solid, non-etheric. In a word, it's plain vacuum—"

"But I lived and breathed!" I interrupted him.

"Are you *sure*?" he asked quietly.

I hesitated. Now that I came to think back, I wasn't!

"You can no more be sure you lived and breathed than you can be sure of what you do under anaesthetic," he said. "But

you were still heading along a Time Line—not of your own volition, mind you—but inevitably, because Time sweeps *us* along with *it*. And so, when the curve struck the normal straight Time Line leading from past to future—the *World* Line, that is, which Earth herself is following—you became a part of it again, but you were twenty-five years ahead of the present."

I nodded slowly. So far he made sense.

"You stayed there for a period of which you are uncertain, chiefly because your sense of Time had become catastrophically upset. And then, still impelled along this circular Time Line, you came back through hyperspace and once more intersected the normal Now Line exactly twenty-four hours afterwards. Events then proceeded normally for a while until—*still* following the circle—you passed through hyperspace to a past event. Then, hyperspace intervened once more, and so you came back to Now."

"Then as the circles grow larger from the center the gaps will become correspondingly greater?" I questioned, and my voice sounded as though it did not belong to me.



Dr. Pembroke gave me a sympathetic glance and nodded.

"Just so; and the mathematical accuracy of first, twenty-five and then, two hundred years—forward and backward—shows that the problem is not a disorder but a mathematical fluke quite beyond human power to alter. You move in a circle, Mr. Mills, not a straight line, and unless at some point the circle turns back on itself—an unlikely possibility since the Universe is a perfect cyclic scheme—I can foresee nothing else but ... endless circular traveling, gradually taking in vast segments of Time until ..."



Pembroke stopped and the room seemed deathly quiet. For some reason though, I was calm now the thing was explained.

"Can you account for my not feeling tired?" I asked presently.

"Certainly. You somewhat resemble a battery. You use up energy in a forward movement into Time because you are, in essence, moving into the unexplored—but in the backward movement the energy replaces itself because you are merely returning to a state already lived. You cannot grow old, or tired, or suffer from catabolism in the ordinary way because you represent a perfect balance between catabolism and anabolism, the exact amount of each being equal because each journey is the same amount of Time—namely, first twenty-five, then two hundred. And next—well, who knows?"

"Look here," I said slowly. "This last time I went back two hundred years, as I told you, but I was somebody else—a pioneer or something of two centuries ago. I was never that!"

"In a past life you must have been," he answered calmly. "Otherwise you could not have taken over that identity."

"Then when I *was* that person why didn't I know what lay in the future?"

"Perhaps you did. Can you be sure that you didn't?"

This was becoming involved all right but, after all, I wasn't sure. No, darn it, I couldn't answer it. Maybe I *had* known!

"And when I was a boy of seven?" I asked. "I presume I became a boy again because I was just at that age?"

"Just so. Time-instants are indestructible. You are bound to become at a certain instant what you are *at* that instant. Otherwise Time itself would become a misnomer. You will ask why—at seven years of age—you did not know what you would do at thirty-two? Again I say, are you sure you didn't?"

"I—I don't know. I don't think so—unless it was buried in my subconscious or something."

"It must have been. It was there, that knowledge, but maybe you considered it as just a dream fancy and thought no more

about it, just as we speculate on how we may look in, say, ten years time and then dismiss it as pure imagination. But with you such an imagining would be fact. And incidentally, as for your carrying a memory of these present experiences about with you, remember that your physical self is all that is affected by Time. Mind and memory cannot alter."

"And—what happens now?" I simply dragged the words out.

"For your sake, young man, I hope things will straighten out for you. But if they don't I have a proposition. Tell me, have you any relatives?"

"None living, no. I was intending to marry Miss Hargreaves here very soon."

"Mmmm, just so. Well, the Institute of Science is prepared to subsidize a trust by which anybody you may name can benefit. In return we ask that in your swing back to the Now Line you will give us every detail of what has been happening to you during your absences."

I shook my head bewilderedly. "I'll—I'll do it willingly, but I don't want the money. And Bet—Miss Hargreaves—has plenty of money anyway. Doc, isn't there some way to remedy all this?" I asked desperately. "I can tell from your making this proposition that you consider it serious."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mills. I really am. But no human agency can come to grips with your problem."

I was silent through a long interval, Betty seated now at my side. I looked at her hopelessly.

"Bet, sweetheart, what do *you* say? Do you know anybody who needs money in trust?"

"No!" she answered bitterly. "Money is the cheapest, most earthy compensation science can offer you for a ruined life. I don't want any part of it. Oh, Dick! There must be some way out of this!"

I shook my head. There wasn't I knew it now.... Finally I told Pembroke that the money had better be handed over to scientific research, and on my all too infrequent returns to Now I would tell everything I knew.

"We could marry," I whispered to Betty. "Only it wouldn't be fair to you. A day might come when I'd never return."

Pembroke confirmed this quietly. "It will," he said. "When your circular line takes so wide an orbit that it passes beyond the ends of the Now Line into hyperspace, you'll vanish forever."

Then I was doomed indeed! All I could hope for was an occasional glimpse of Betty. As for the rest, I didn't know....

My five-hour stay was taken up in signing legal documents. Then once more I was swept inevitably into hyperspace. So I went through the gray enigma which baffles description and this time I was six hundred years ahead of the Now Line. There was still progress, the building of superb cities, the conquest of other worlds, a sense of greater equality and comradeship between both sexes ...

So back to Now for a brief spell with a tearful Betty, a long description of my experiences to the scientists, a banquet in my honor at the Science Institute—then outwards and backwards into the past, for a gap of another six hundred years.

Back and forth as the circle widened ...

I have tried to keep out of this narrative the inner horror I experienced at it all—the dull, dead futility of being flung by nameless force into an ever widening gulf. Each time, of course, as the circle widened I went further afield.

Hundreds of years, thousands of years, from one end of the pendulum's swing to the other—backwards into scores of lives which had long since been effaced from memory; forwards into a wonder world of ever increasing splendor ...

Then, in the tens of thousands of years ahead, I saw Man was pretty close to leaving his material form altogether and becoming purely mental. So much so that, on my visit after this one, Earth was empty and turning one face to the sun. Age, old and remorseless, was crawling over a once busy planet.

At the opposite end of the scale life was swinging down into the Neanderthal man stage, and then further back still to where Man was not even present.

But there were amoeba, the first forms of life, and I fancy that I must have been one of these!

Backwards—forwards—with the visions of Now mere shadows in a universe which was to me insane. Nothing made sense any more. I was losing touch with every well remembered thing, with the dear girl who always awaited my comings and goings—growing older, but always loyal. And around her the cold, impersonal scientists logging down information that could chart the course of civilizations for ages to come. No wonder I had seen progress ahead! My own guidance had prevented any mistakes and in those distant visions I had seen the fruit of my own advice! Incredible—yet true.

Gradually I realized that my Time Circle was now becoming so huge that it was involving a stupendous orbit which did not include Earth but the Universe as a whole, proving how independent of normal Time Lines had my vicious circle become.

In my swing I saw the birth of the Earth and the gradual slowing down of the Universe. This, I think, is destined to be my last return to the Now time, for the next curve will be so enormous that—well. I do not think I shall be able to make contact with the Now Line at all. The scientists have charted it all out for me.

The curve will take me to the period of the initial explosion which created the expanding universe out of—what? That will be in the past. And my futureward movement will carry me to that state of sublime peace where all the possible interchanges of energy have been made, where there exists thermodynamical equilibrium and the death of all that is. At either end of the curve Time is nonexistent! This is where I may at last find rest.

As I think on these things, writing these last words in the world of Now, I cannot help but marvel at what I have done.... But I hate it! I hate it with all my human soul! Opposite to me in this bright room Betty is seated, silent, dry-eyed, faithful to the last. Science is still represented in the quiet men in the chairs by the far wall, all of them busy writing and checking notes.

Never was so strange a sentence passed on a human being!

The grayness is coming! I have no time to write any more....

[The end of *The Vicious Circle* by John Francis Russell Fearn]