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The CIRCLE of ZERO

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CHAPTER I

The Law of Chance

If there were a mountain a thousand miles high, and every thousand years a bird flew over it, just brushing the peak with the tip of its wing, in the course of inconceivable eons the mountain would be worn away. Yet all those ages would not be one second to the length of eternity....

Old Professor de Néant Probes
Into the Bottomless Well of
Infinity!

I don't know what philosophical mind penned the foregoing, but the words keep recurring to me since last I saw old Aurore de Néant, erstwhile professor of psychology at Tulane. When, back in '24, I took that course in Morbid Psychology from him, I think the only reason for taking it at all was that I needed an eleven o'clock on Tuesdays and Thursdays to round out a lazy program.

I was gay Jack Anders, twenty-two years old, and the reason seemed sufficient. At least, I'm sure that dark and lovely Yvonne de Néant had nothing to do with it; she was but a slim child of sixteen.

Old de Néant liked me, Lord knows why, for I was a poor enough student. Perhaps it was because I never, to his knowledge, punned on his name. Aurore de Néant translates to Dawn of Nothingness, you see; you can imagine what students did to such a name. "Rising Zero"—"Empty Morning"—those were two of the milder sobriquets.

That was in '24. Five years later I was a bond salesman in New York, and Professor Aurore de Néant was fired. I learned about it when he called me up; I had drifted quite out of touch with University days.

He was a thrifty sort. He had saved a comfortable sum, and had moved to New York, and that's when I started seeing Yvonne again, now darkly beautiful as a Tanagra figurine. I was doing pretty well, and was piling up a surplus against the day when Yvonne and I ...

At least, that was the situation in August, 1929. In October of the same year, I was as clean as a gnawed bone and old de Néant had but little more meat. I was young, and could afford to laugh; he was old, and he turned bitter. And indeed, Yvonne and I did little enough laughing when we thought of our own future; but we didn't brood like the professor.

I remember the evening he broached the subject of the Circle of Zero. It was a rainy, blustering fall night, and his beard waggled in the dim lamplight like a wisp of grey mist. Yvonne and I had been staying in evenings of late; shows cost money, and I felt that she appreciated my talking to her father, and—after all—he retired early.

She was sitting on the davenport at his side when he suddenly stabbed a gnarled finger at me and snapped, "Happiness depends on money!"

I was startled. "Well, it helps," I agreed.

His pale blue eyes glittered. "We must recover ours!" he rasped.

"How?"

"I know how. Yes, I know how!" He grinned thinly. "They think I'm mad. *You* think I'm mad; even Yvonne thinks so."

The girl said softly, reproachfully, "Father!"

"But I'm not," he continued. "You and Yvonne, and all the fools holding chairs at universities—yes! But not me."

"I will be, all right, if conditions don't get better soon," I murmured. I was used to the old man's outbursts.

"They will be better for us," he said, calming. "Money! We will do anything for money, won't we, Anders?"

"Anything honest."

"Yes, anything honest. Time is honest, isn't it? An honest cheat, because it takes everything human and turns it into dust." He peered at my puzzled face. "I will explain," he said, "how we can cheat time."

"Cheat—"

"Yes. Listen, Jack. Have you ever stood in a strange place and felt a sense of having been there before? Have you ever taken a trip and sensed that sometime, somehow, you had done exactly the same thing—when you know you hadn't?"

"Of course. Everyone has. A memory of the present, Bergson calls it—"

"Bergson is a fool! Philosophy without science. Listen to me." He leaned forward. "Did you ever hear of the Law of Chance?"

I laughed. "My business is stocks and bonds. I *ought* to know of it."

"Ah," he said, "but not enough of it. Suppose I have a barrel with a million trillion white grains of sand in it, and one black grain. You stand and draw a single grain, one after the other, look at it, and throw it back into the barrel. What are the odds against drawing the black grain?"

"A million trillion to one, on each draw."

"And if you draw half of the million trillion grains?"

"Then the odds are even."

"So!" he said. "In other words, if you draw long enough, even though you return each grain to the barrel and draw again, some day you will draw the black one—*if you try long enough!*"

"Yes," I said.

"Suppose now you tried for eternity?"

"Eh?"

"Don't you see, Jack? In eternity, the Law of Chance functions perfectly. In eternity, sooner or later, every possible combination of things and events must happen. *Must* happen, *if* it's a possible combination. I say, therefore, that in eternity, *whatever can happen will happen!*" His blue eyes blazed in pale fire.

I was a trifle dazed. "I guess you're right," I muttered.

"Right! Of course I'm right. Mathematics is infallible. Now do you see the conclusion?"

"Why—that sooner or later everything will happen."

"Bah! It is true that there is eternity in the future; we cannot imagine time ending. But Flammarion, before he died, pointed out that there is also an eternity in the past. Since in eternity everything possible must happen, it follows that everything *must already have happened!*"

I gasped. "Wait a minute! I don't see—"

"Stupidity!" he hissed. "It is but to say with Einstein that not only space is curved, but time. To say that after untold eons of millenniums, the same things repeat themselves because they must! The Law of Chance says they must, given time enough. The past and the future are the same thing, because everything that will happen must already have happened. Can't you follow so simple a chain of logic?"

"Why—yes. But where does it lead?"

"To our money! To our money!"

"What?"

"Listen. Do not interrupt. In the past, all possible combinations of atoms and circumstances must have occurred." He paused, then stabbed that bony finger of his at me. "Jack Anders, *you* are a possible combination of atoms and circumstances! Possible because you exist at this moment!"

"You mean—that *I* have happened before?"

He sneered. "How apt you are! Yes, you have happened before, and will again."

"Transmigration!" I gulped. "That's unscientific."

"Indeed?" He frowned as if in effort to gather his thoughts. "The poet Robert Burns was buried under an apple tree. When, years after his death, he was to be removed to rest among the great men of Westminster Abbey, do you know what they found? Do you know?"—shouting.

"I'm sorry, but I don't."

"They found a root! A root with a bulge for a head, branch roots for arms and legs, and little rootlets for fingers and toes. The apple tree had eaten Bobby Burns—but who had eaten the apples?"

"Who—what?"

"Exactly. Who and what? The substance that had been Burns was in the bodies of Scotch countrymen and children, in the bodies of caterpillars who had eaten the leaves and become butterflies and been eaten by birds, in the wood of the tree. Where is Bobby Burns? Transmigration, I tell you! Isn't that transmigration?"

"Yes—but not what you meant about me. His body may be living, but in a thousand different forms."

"Ah! And when some day, eons and eternities in the future, the Laws of Chance form another nebula that will cool to another sun and another earth, is there not the same chance that those scattered atoms may reassemble another Bobby Burns?"

"But what a chance! Trillions and trillions to one!"

"But eternity, Jack! In eternity that one chance out of all those trillions must happen—*must* happen!"

I was floored. I stared at Yvonne's pale and lovely features, then at the glistening old eyes of Aurore de Néant.

"You win," I said with a long sigh. "But what of it? This is still nineteen twenty-nine, and our money's still sunk in a very sick securities market."

"Money!" he groaned. "Don't you see? That memory we started from—that sense of having done a thing before—that's a memory out of the infinitely dead past—or, which is the same, the infinitely remote future. If only—if only one could remember clearly! But I have a way." His voice rose suddenly to a shrill scream. "Yes, I have a way!"

Wild eyes glared at me. I said, "A way to remember our former incarnations?" One had to humor the old professor. "To remember—the future?"

"Yes! Reincarnation!" His voice crackled wildly. "*Re-in-carnatione*, which is Latin for 'by the thing in the carnation', but it wasn't a carnation—it was an apple tree. The carnation is *dianthus carophyllus*, which proves that the Hottentots plant carnations on the graves of their ancestors, whence the expression 'nipped in the bud.' If carnations grow on apple trees—"

"Father!" cut in Yvonne sharply. "You're tired!" Her voice softened. "Come. You're going to bed."

"Yes," he cackled. "To a bed of carnations."

CHAPTER II

Experiments in Hypnotism

Some evenings later, Aurore de Néant reverted to the same topic. He was clear enough as to where he had left off.

"So in this millennially dead past," he began suddenly, "there was a year nineteen twenty-nine, and two fools named Anders and de Néant, who invested their money in what are sarcastically called securities. There was a clown's panic, and their money vanished." He leered fantastically at me. "Wouldn't it be nice if they could remember what happened in, say, the months from December, nineteen twenty-nine, to June, nineteen thirty—next year?" His voice was suddenly whining. "They could get their money back then!"

I humored him. "If they could remember."

"They can!" he blazed. "They can!"

"How?"

His voice dropped to a confidential softness. "Hypnotism! You studied Morbid Psychology under me, didn't you, Jack? Yes—I remember."

"But, hypnotism!" I objected. "Every psychiatrist uses that in his treatments, and no one has remembered a previous incarnation, or anything like it."

"No. They're fools, these doctors and psychiatrists. Listen—do you remember the three stages of the hypnotic state, as you learned them?"

"Yes. Somnambulism, lethargy, catalepsy."

"Right. In the first, the subject speaks, answers questions. In the second, he sleeps deeply. In the third, catalepsy, he is rigid, stiff, so that he can be laid across two chairs, sat on—all that nonsense."

"I remember. What of it?"

He grinned bleakly. "In the first stage the subject remembers everything that ever happened during his life. His subconscious mind is dominant, and that never forgets. Correct?"

"So we were taught."

He leaned tensely forward. "In the second stage, lethargy, my theory is that he remembers everything that happened in his other lives! He remembers the future!"

"Huh? Why doesn't someone do it, then?"

"He remembers while he sleeps; he forgets when he wakes. That's why. But I believe that with proper training he can learn to remember."

"And you're going to try?"

"Not I. I know too little of finance. I wouldn't know how to interpret my memories."

"Who, then?"

"You!" He jabbed that long finger against me.

I was thoroughly startled. "Me? Oh, no! Not a chance of it!"

"Jack," he said querulously, "didn't you study hypnotism in my course? Didn't you learn how harmless it is? You know what tommyrot the idea is of one mind dominating another. You know the subject really hypnotizes himself, and that no one can hypnotize an unwilling person. Then what are you afraid of?"

I—well, I didn't know what to answer. "I'm not afraid," I said grimly. "I just don't like it."

"You're afraid!"

"I'm not!"

"You are!" He was growing excited.

It was at that moment that Yvonne's footsteps sounded in the hall. His eyes glittered; he looked at me with a sinister hint of cunning.

"I dislike cowards," he whispered. His voice rose. "So does Yvonne!"

The girl entered, perceiving his excitement. "Oh!" she frowned. "Why do you have to take these theories so to heart, father?"

"Theories?" he screeched. "Yes! I have a theory that when you walk you stand still and the sidewalk moves back. No—then the sidewalk would split if two people walked toward each other—or maybe it's elastic. Of course it's elastic! That's why the last mile is the longest; it's been stretched!"

Yvonne got him to bed.

Well, he talked me into it. I don't know how much was due to my own credulity and how much to Yvonne's solemn dark eyes. I half-believed the professor by the time he'd spent another evening in argument, but I think the clincher was his veiled threat to forbid Yvonne my company. She'd have obeyed him if it killed her; she was from New Orleans too, you see, and of Creole blood.

I won't describe that troublesome course of training. One has to develop the hypnotic habit; it's like any other habit, and must be formed slowly. Contrary to the popular opinion, morons and people of low intelligence can't ever do it. It takes real concentration; the whole knack of it is in the ability to concentrate one's attention—and I don't mean the hypnotist, either.

I mean the subject. The hypnotist hasn't a thing to do with it except to furnish the necessary suggestion by murmuring, "Sleep—sleep—sleep—sleep—" And even that isn't necessary, once you learn the trick of it.

I spent half an hour or more, nearly every evening, learning that trick. It was tedious, and a dozen times I became thoroughly disgusted and swore to have no more to do with the farce. But always, after the half-hour's humoring of de Néant, there was Yvonne, and the boredom vanished. As a sort of reward, I suppose, the old man took to leaving us alone; and we used our time, I'll wager, to better purpose than he used his.

But I began to learn, little by little. Came a time, after three weeks of tedium, when I was able to cast myself into a light somnambulistic state. I remember how the glitter of the cheap stone in Professor de Néant's ring grew until it filled the world, and how his voice, mechanically dull, murmured like the waves of sleep in my ears. I remember everything that transpired during those minutes, even his query, "Are you sleeping?" and my automatic reply, "Yes."

By the end of November we had mastered the second state of lethargy, and then—I don't know why, but a sort of enthusiasm for the madness took hold of me. Business was at a standstill; I grew tired of facing customers to whom I had sold bonds at par that were now worth fifty or less, and trying to explain why. After a while I began to drop in on the professor during the afternoon, and we went through the insane routine again and again.

Yvonne comprehended only a part of the bizarre scheme. She was never in the room during our half-hour trials, and knew only vaguely that we were involved in some sort of experiment that was to restore our lost money. I don't suppose she had much faith in it, but she always indulged her father.

It was early in December that I began to remember things. Dim and formless things at first—sensations that utterly eluded the rigidities of words. I tried to express them to de Néant, but it was hopeless.

"A circular feeling," I'd say. "No—not exactly—a sense of spiral—not that, either. Roundness—I can't recall it now. It slips away."

He was jubilant. "It comes!" he whispered, grey beard a-waggle and pale eyes glittering. "You begin to remember!"

"But what good is a memory like that?"

"Wait! It will come clearer. Of course not all your memories will be of the sort we can use. They will be scattered. Through all the multifold eternities of the past-future circle you can't have been always Jack Anders, securities salesman. There will be fragmentary memories, recollections of times when your personality was partially existent, when the Laws of Chance had assembled a being who was not quite Jack Anders, in some period of the infinite worlds that must have risen and died in the span of eternities. But somewhere, too, the same atoms, the same conditions, must have made you. You're the black grain among the trillions of white grains, and with all eternity to draw in, you *must* have been drawn before—many, many times."

"Do you suppose," I asked suddenly, "that anyone exists twice on the same earth? Reincarnation in the sense of the Hindus?"

He laughed scornfully. "The age of the earth is somewhere between a thousand million and three thousand million years. What proportion of eternity is that?"

"Why—no proportion at all. Zero."

"Exactly, and zero represents the chance of the same atoms combining to form the same person twice in one cycle of a planet. But I have shown that trillions, or trillions of trillions of years ago, there *must* have been another earth, another Jack Anders, and"—his voice took on that whining note—"another crash that ruined Jack Anders and old de Néant. That is the time you must remember out of lethargy."

"Catalepsy!" I said. "What would one remember in that?"

"God knows."

"What a mad scheme!" I said suddenly. "What a crazy pair of fools we are!" The adjectives were a mistake.

"Mad? Crazy?" His voice became a screech. "Old de Néant is mad, eh? Old Dawn of Nothingness is crazy! You think time doesn't go in a circle, don't you? Do you know what a circle represents? I'll tell you! A circle is the mathematical symbol for zero! Time is zero—time is a circle. I have a theory that the hands of a clock are really the noses, because they're on the clock's face, and since time is a circle they go round and round and round and round—"

Yvonne slipped quietly into the room and patted her father's furrowed forehead. She must have been listening.

CHAPTER III

Into the Future

"Look here," I said at a later time to de Néant. "If the past and future are the same thing, then the future's as unchangeable as the past. How, then, can we expect to change it by recovering our money?"

"Change it?" he snorted. "How do you know we're changing it? How do you know that this same thing wasn't done by that Jack Anders and de Néant back on the other side of eternity? I say it *was!*"

I subsided, and the weird business went on. My memories—if they *were* memories—were coming clearer now. Often and often I saw things out of my own immediate past of twenty-seven years, though of course de Néant assured me that these were visions from the past of that other self on the far side of time.

I saw other things too, incidents that I couldn't place in my experience, though I couldn't be quite sure they didn't belong there. I might have forgotten, you see, since they were of no particular importance. I recounted everything dutifully to the old man immediately upon awakening, and sometimes that was difficult, like trying to find words for a half-remembered dream.

There were other memories as well—bizarre, outlandish dreams that had little parallel in human history. These were always vague and sometimes very horrible, and only their inchoate and formless character kept them from being utterly nerve-racking and terrifying.

At one time, I recall, I was gazing through a little crystalline window into a red fog through which moved indescribable faces—not human, not even associable with anything I had ever seen. On another occasion I was wandering, clad in furs, across a cold grey desert, and at my side was a woman who was not quite Yvonne.

I remember calling her Pyroniva, and knowing even that the name meant "Snowy-fire." And here and there in the air about us floated queer little bloated fungoid things, bobbing around like potatoes in a water-bucket; and once we stood very quiet while a menacing form that was only remotely like the small fungi droned purposefully far overhead, toward some unknown objective.

At still another time I was peering fascinated into a spinning pool of mercury, watching an image therein of two wild, winged figures playing in a roseate glade—not at all human in form, but transcendently beautiful, bright and iridescent.

I felt a strange kinship between these two creatures and myself and Yvonne, but I had no inkling of what they were, nor upon what world, nor at what time in eternity, nor even of what nature was the room that held the spinning pool that pictured them.

Old Aurore de Néant listened carefully to the wild word-pictures I drew.

"Fascinating!" he muttered. "Glimpses of an infinitely distant future caught from a ten-fold infinitely remote past. These things you describe are not earthly; it means that somewhere, sometime, men are actually to burst the prison of space and visit other worlds. Some day—"

"If these glimpses aren't simply nightmares," I said.

"They're not nightmares," he snapped, "but they might as well be, for all the value they are to us." I could see him struggle to calm himself. "Our money is still gone. We must try, keep trying, for years, for centuries, until we get the black grain of sand, because black sand is a sign of gold-bearing ore—" He paused. "What am I talking about?" he said querulously.

Well, we kept trying. Interspersed with the wild, all but indescribable visions came others almost rational. The thing became a fascinating game. I was neglecting my business—though that was small loss—to chase dreams with old Professor Aurore de Néant.

I spent evenings, afternoons, and finally mornings, too, lying in the slumber of the lethargic state, or telling the old man what fantastic things I had dreamed—or, as he said, remembered. Reality became dim to me; I was living in an

outlandish world of fancy, and only the dark, tragic eyes of Yvonne tugged at me, pulled me back into the daylight world of sanity.

I have mentioned more nearly rational visions. I recall one—a city, but what a city! Sky-piercing, white and beautiful, and the people of it were grave with the wisdom of gods, pale and lovely people, but solemn, wistful, sad. There was the aura of brilliance and wickedness that hovers about all great cities, that was born, I suppose, in Babylon, and will remain until great cities are no more.

But there was something else, something rather intangible; I don't know exactly what to call it, but perhaps the word decadence is as close as any word we have. As I stood at the base of a colossal structure there was the whir of quiet machinery, but it seemed to me, nevertheless, that the city was dying.

It might have been the moss that grew green on the north walls of the buildings; it might have been the grass that pierced here and there through the cracks of the marble pavements; or it might have been only the grave and sad demeanor of the pale inhabitants. There was something that hinted of a doomed city and a dying race.

A strange thing happened when I tried to describe this particular memory to old de Néant. I stumbled over the details, of course; these visions from the unplumbed depths of eternity were curiously hard to fix between the rigid walls of words. They tended to grow vague, to elude the waking memory. Thus, in this description, I had forgotten the name of the city.

"It was called," I said hesitatingly, "Termis or Termolia, or—"

"Termopolis!" hissed de Néant impatiently. "City of the End!"

I stared amazed. "That's it! But how did you know?" In the sleep of lethargy, I was sure, one never speaks.

A queer, cunning look flashed in his pale eyes. "I knew," he muttered. "I knew." He would say no more.

But I think I saw that city once again. It was when I wandered over a brown and treeless plain, not like that cold grey desert, but apparently an arid and barren region of the earth. Dim on the western horizon was the circle of a great cool, reddish sun; it had always been there, I remembered, and knew with some other part of my mind that the vast brake of the tides had at last slowed the earth's rotation to a stop, and day and night no longer chased each other around the planet.

The air was biting cold, and my companions and I—there were half a dozen of us—moved in a huddled group, as if to lend each other warmth from our half-naked bodies. We were all of us thin-legged, skinny creatures, with oddly deep chests and enormous, luminous eyes, and the one nearest me was again a woman who had something of Yvonne in her, but very little. And I was not quite Jack Anders, either; but some remote fragment of me survived in that barbaric brain.

Beyond a hill was the surge of an oily sea. We crept circling about the mound, and suddenly I perceived that sometime in the infinite past that hill had been a city. A few Gargantuan blocks of stone lay crumbling on it, and one lonely fragment of a ruined wall rose gauntly to four or five times a man's height. It was at this spectral remnant that the leader of our miserable crew gestured, then spoke in somber tones—not English words, but I understood.

"The gods," he said—"the gods who piled stones upon stones are dead, and harm not us who pass the place of their dwelling."

I knew what that was meant to be. It was an incantation, a ritual; to protect us from the spirits that lurked among the ruins—the ruins, I believe, of a city built by our own ancestors thousands of generations before.

As we passed the wall I looked back at a flicker of movement, and saw something hideously like a black rubber doormat flop itself around the angle of the wall. I drew closer to the woman beside me and we crept on down to the sea for water—yes, water, for with the cessation of the planet's rotation rainfall had vanished also, and all life huddled near the edge of the undying sea and learned to drink its bitter brine. I didn't glance again at the hill which had been Termopolis, the City of the End; but I knew that some chance-born fragment of Jack Anders had been—or will be; what difference, if time *is* a circle?—witness of an age close to the day of humanity's doom.

It was early in December that I had the first memory of something that might have been suggestive of success. It was a simple and very sweet memory, just Yvonne and I in a garden that I knew was the inner grounds on one of the New Orleans' old homes—one of those built, in the Continental fashion, about a court.

We sat on a stone bench beneath the oleanders, and I slipped my arm very tenderly about her and murmured, "Are you happy, Yvonne?"

She looked at me with those tragic eyes of hers and smiled, and then answered, "As happy as I have ever been."

And I kissed her.

That was all, but it was important. It was vastly important, because it was definitely not a memory out of my own personal past. You see, I had never sat beside Yvonne in a garden sweet with oleanders in the Old Town of New Orleans, and I had never kissed her until we met again in New York.

Aurore de Néant was elated when I described this vision.

"You see!" he gloated. "There is evidence. You have remembered the future! Not your own future, of course, but that of another ghostly Jack Anders, who died trillions and quadrillions of years ago."

"But it doesn't help us, does it?" I asked.

"Oh, it will come now! You wait. The thing we want will come."

And it did, within a week. This memory was curiously bright and clear, and familiar in every detail. I remember the day. It was the eighth of December, 1929, and I had wandered aimlessly about in search of business during the morning. In the grip of that fascination I mentioned I drifted to de Néant's apartment after lunch. Yvonne left us to ourselves, as was her custom, and we began.

This was, as I said, a sharply outlined memory—or dream. I was leaning over my desk in the company's office, that too-seldom-visited office. One of the other salesmen—Summers was his name—was leaning over my shoulder, and we were engaged in the quite customary pastime of scanning the final market reports in the evening paper. The print stood out clear as reality itself: I glanced without surprise at the date-line. It was Thursday, April 27th, 1930—almost five months in the future!

Not that I realised that during the vision, of course. The day was merely the present to me; I was simply looking over the list of the day's trading. Figures—familiar names. Telephone, 210¾; U.S. Steel, 161; Paramount, 68½.

I jabbed a finger at Steel. "I bought that at 72," I said over my shoulder to Summers. "I sold out everything today. Every stock I own. I'm getting out before there's a secondary crack."

"Lucky stiff!" he murmured. "Buy at the December lows and sell out now! Wish I'd had money to do it." He paused. "What you gonna do? Stay with the company?"

"No. I've enough to live on. I'm going to stick it in Governments and paid-up insurance, and live on the income. I've had enough of gambling."

"You lucky stiff!" he said again. "I'm sick of the Street too. Staying in New York?"

"For a while. Just till I get my stuff invested properly. Yvonne and I are going to New Orleans for the winter." I paused. "She's had a tough time of it. I'm glad we're where we are."

"Who wouldn't be?" asked Summers, and then again, "You lucky stiff!"

De Néant was frantically excited when I described this to him. "That's it!" he screamed. "We buy! We buy tomorrow! We sell on the twenty-seventh of May, and then—New Orleans!"

Of course I was nearly equally enthusiastic. "By heaven!" I said. "It's worth the risk! We'll do it!" And then a sudden hopeless thought. "Do it? Do it with what? I have less than a hundred dollars to my name. And you—"

The old man groaned. "I have nothing," he said in abrupt gloom. "Only the annuity we live on. One can't borrow on that." Again a gleam of hope. "The banks. We'll borrow from them!"

I had to laugh, though it was a bitter laugh. "What bank would lend us money on a story like this? They wouldn't lend Rockefeller himself money to play this sick market, not without security. We're sunk, that's all."

I looked at his pale, worried eyes. "Sunk," he echoed dully. Then again that wild gleam. "*Not* sunk!" he yelled. "How can we be? We *did* do it! You remembered our doing it! We *must* have found the way!"

I gazed, speechless. Suddenly a queer, mad thought flashed over me. This other Jack Anders, this ghost of quadrillions of centuries past—or future—he too must be watching, or had watched, or yet would, watch, me—the Jack Anders of this cycle of eternity. He must be watching as anxiously as I to discover the means. Each of us watching the other; neither of us knowing the answer. The blind leading the blind! I laughed at the irony.

But old de Néant was not laughing. The strangest expression I have ever seen in a man's eyes was in his as he repeated very softly, "We must have found the way, because it was done. At least you and Yvonne found the way."

"Then all of us must," I answered sourly.

"Yes. Oh, yes. Listen to me, Jack. I am an old man, old Aurore de Néant. I am old Dawn of Nothingness, and my mind is cracking. Don't shake your head!" he snapped. "I am not mad. I am simply misunderstood. None of you understand. Why, I have a theory that trees, grass, and people do not grow taller at all; they grow by pushing the earth away from them, which is why you keep hearing that the world is getting smaller every day. But you don't understand; Yvonne doesn't understand—"

The girl must have been listening. Without my seeing her, she had slipped into the room and put her arms gently about her father's shoulders, while she gazed across at me with anxious eyes.

CHAPTER IV

A Prophecy

There was one more vision, irrelevant in a way, yet vitally important in another way. It was the next evening. An early December snowfall was dropping its silent white beyond the windows, and the ill-heated apartment of the de Néants was draughty and chill. I saw Yvonne shiver as she greeted me, and again as she left the room, and I noticed that old de Néant followed her to the door with his thin arms about her, and that he returned with very worried eyes.

"She is New Orleans born," he murmured. "This dreadful arctic climate will destroy her. We must find a way at once."

That vision was a somber one. I stood on a cold, wet, snowy ground; just myself and Yvonne and one who stood beside an open grave. Behind us stretched rows of crosses and white tombstones, but in our corner the place was ragged, untended, unconsecrated. The priest was saying, "And these are things that only God understands."

I slipped a comforting arm about Yvonne. She raised her dark, tragic eyes and whispered: "It was yesterday, Jack—just yesterday that he said to me, 'Next winter you shall spend in New Orleans, Yvonne.' Just yesterday!"

I tried a wretched smile, but I could only stare mournfully at her forlorn face, watching a tear that rolled slowly down her right cheek, hung glistening there a moment, then was joined by another and splashed unregarded on the black bosom of her dress.

That was all, but how could I describe that vision to old de Néant? I tried to evade; he kept insisting.

"There wasn't any hint of the way," I told him. Useless; at last I had to tell anyway.

He was very silent for a full minute. "Jack," he said finally, "do you know when I said that to her about New Orleans? This morning when we watched the snow. This morning!"

I didn't know what to do. Suddenly this whole concept of remembering the future seemed mad, insane; in all my memories there had been not a single spark of real proof, not a single hint of prophecy. So I did nothing at all, but simply gazed silently as old Aurore de Néant walked out of the room. And when, two hours later, while Yvonne and I talked, he finished writing a certain letter and then shot himself through the heart—why, that proved nothing either.

So it was the following day that Yvonne and I, his only mourners, followed old Dawn of Nothingness to his suicide's grave. I stood beside her and tried as best I could to console her, and roused from a dark reverie to hear her words: "Just yesterday that he said to me, 'Next winter you shall spend in New Orleans, Yvonne.' Just yesterday!"

I watched the tear that rolled slowly down her right cheek, hung glistening there a moment, then was joined by another and splashed on the black bosom of her dress.

But it was later, during the evening, that the most ironic revelation of all occurred. I was gloomily blaming myself for the weakness of indulging old de Néant in the mad experiment that had led, in a way, to his death. It was as if Yvonne read my thoughts, for she said suddenly, "He was breaking, Jack. His mind was going. I heard all those strange things he kept murmuring to you."

"What?"

"I listened, of course, behind the door there. I never left him alone. I heard him whisper the queerest things—faces in a red fog, words about a cold grey desert, the name Pyroniva, the word Termopolis. He leaned over you as you sat with closed eyes, and he whispered, whispered all the time."

Irony of ironies! It was old de Néant's mad mind that had suggested the visions! He had described them to me as I sat in the sleep of lethargy!

Later we found the letter he had written, and again I was deeply moved. The old man had carried a little insurance; just a week before he had borrowed on one of the policies to pay the premiums on it and the others. But the letter—well, he had made *me* beneficiary of half the amount! And the instructions were:

"You, Jack Anders, will take both your money and Yvonne's and carry out the plan as you know I wish."

Lunacy! De Néant had found the way to provide the money, but—I couldn't gamble Yvonne's last dollar on the scheme of a disordered mind.

"What will we do?" I asked her. "Of course the money's all yours. I won't touch it."

"Mine?" she echoed. "Why, no. We'll do as he wished. Do you think I'd not respect his last request?"

Well, we did. I took those miserable few thousands and spread it around in that sick December market. You remember what happened, how during the spring the prices skyrocketed as if they were heading back toward 1929, when actually the depression was just gathering breath. I rode that market like a circus performer; I took profits and pyramided them back, and on April 27th, with our money multiplied fifty times, I sold out and watched the market slide back.

Coincidence? Very likely. After all, Aurore de Néant's mind was clear enough most of the time. Other economists predicted that spring rise; perhaps he foresaw it too. Perhaps he staged this whole affair just to trick us into the gamble, one which we'd never have dared otherwise. And then when he saw we were going to fail from lack of money, he took the only means he had of providing it.

Perhaps. That's the rational explanation, and yet—that vision of ruined Termopolis keeps haunting me. I see again the grey cold desert of the floating fungi. I wonder often about the immutable Laws of Chance, and about a ghostly Jack Anders somewhere beyond eternity.

For perhaps he does—did—will exist. Otherwise, how to explain that final vision? What of Yvonne's words beside her father's grave? Could he have foreseen those words and whispered them to me? Possibly. But what, then, of those two tears that hung glistening, merged, and dropped from her cheeks?

What of them?

[The end of *The Circle of Zero* by Stanley G(rauman). Weinbaum]