

The Stillwell Degravitator

By Charles R. Tanner

The quiet which usually reigns over the main hail of the big library was suddenly broken by a crash, and the sound of falling books. A girl's scream followed immediately, and the scraping of chairs as startled readers leaped to their feet. I looked up from the article I had been reading, and was not surprised to find that my opinion of the cause of the accident was correct.

At the upper end of the hail, leaning over a fallen rack of books, with a pained and apologetic look on his face, was my friend Professor Isaac N. Stillwell well.

The professor's huge bulk (he is six feet tall and weighs over two hundred and ninety pounds) seemed even larger than usual today. He wore a light gray topcoat, and light colors always enhance a person's size; and this, combined with the fact that the little assistant librarian who stood looking woefully down at the fallen books was a small thin woman, made him seem almost globular. He had removed his hat, of course and the light from the skylight above, striking his immense bald head, made it shine like the proverbial billiard ball, and added immeasurably to the effect of ponderous dignity. And that huge form was stooping, or attempting to stoop, to remedy the damage done.

I left my seat and hurried over to the scene of the accident, Though Stillwell is one of the most proper and dignified men I ever knew, there is about him a certain clumsiness that is cumulative, and when one accident occurs to him, it is better to che4 him at once or you will have half a dozen on your hands.

So I hurried over and tapped him on the shoulder and after a nod of recognition, I motioned him to one side. I as-sisted the little librarian to pick up and stack the books, and then turned to my friend. He broke into whispered thanks, but I silenced him and then made my way back to the table where I had been sitting. Stillwell followed and raised his heavy eyebrows in interest when be saw what I had been reading.

"A Note on Further Aspects of the Universal Field Theory,' eh?" he whis-pered, "You know, Clement, I may have a few remarks to make on that subject myself, before long."

I noticed several of the readers about the table glance up with that peculiar look that people assume to emphasize annoyance. I made a gesture of silence and Stillwell, after giving a glance about, motioned me to follow him. I abandoned my magazine with a sigh of regret and arose. We left the library.

"Quite a coincidence, Clement, my boy," said the huge professor as we stepped outside. "I mean, finding you in there reading of Einstein's theory of a universal field. You see, I've been rather eager to demonstrate a little experiment I have been working on. Could you come down to the house for an hour or two?"

I saw no reason why I couldn't. In fact, I am always eager to observe the experiments of my portly friend. Stillwell's intellect is as ponderous as his body and his versatility is so great that there is hardly a science in the books that has not been assisted by his brilliant aid Of course there is a certain touch of uncertainty about him, due to that amazing clumsiness of his this really adds a certain tang to contact with him, and so I have 'never yet refused when chance offered to watch this genius work.

So now I led the way to my machine and we started off toward the professor's house, and the beginning of the strangest adventure that has yet befallen me.

For, once in the professor's home, we repaired at once to the laboratory in the basement. Here, in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a maze of bent and broken sections of pipe, yards upon yards of twisted wires and the remains of half a dozen big shattered vacuum tubes, 'stood an odd box-like apparatus, having at one end a long extending tube of metal like an old-fashioned blunder-buss. The blunderbuss pointed to a little table with a white enameled top, on which lay a group of crystals, among which I recognized quartz, beryl and almandite, as well as a huge stone.

"Now, Clement," began the profes-sor, as soon as he had removed his hat and coat. "I can see that you are won-dering and speculating already. So I'll get right to the point. As you doubtless know, modern theory considers gravity not as a force, but as a condition of space, a 'warp'* I believe it is popularly called, caused by the very presence: of matter. Suppose there was some way of neutralizing - or rather, of hetero-dyning warping impulse. What would be the result?"

**All matter, even a single atom, warps the space surrounding it, to a certain extent. The resulting warp affects other matter so that its path of least resistance is no longer in a Euclidean straight line, but along a line that tends toward the warping body of matter.—ED.*

“Why—” I looked at him, incredulously. “Why, I suppose it would be to neutralize, or even to reverse gravity. But surely it will be hundreds of years before science progresses sufficiently to enable it to do that.”

“On the contrary, my dear Clement,” the professor chuckled, heavily. “On the contrary, that is just what I have brought you here to see. I have devised a means to accomplish that phenomenon, and this is it, right here.”

He moved over to the box-like apparatus and, ignoring my exclamations of wonder, he proceeded to adjust the various dials and switches which covered one side of it. Presently he removed the crystals from the table, all but the large boulder, and then he turned again to me.

“Now watch, my boy,” he exclaimed. “You probably know that weight is a mere function of mass, do you not? Well, the recently discovered positron has, I believe you will recall, a *negative* mass. It weighs so much *less* than nothing! Using this as a base of my investigations, and remembering that the proton, which contains most of the mass of the atom, is like the positron, positive electrically, I have succeeded in inducing negative mass in the proton.”

He made another adjustment or two on his machine and went on:

“This machine is the first one I designed, and so it is rather crude. It only works on close-packed solids, and is very hard to adjust. I have already worked out, in principle, a far simpler apparatus, that will work on anything. But this will do for a demonstration

He turned on a switch and I heard a whine from the box, followed by a deep sigh. I half expected some funny-colored ray to shoot out from the blunderbuss, but if a beam of force did shoot out, it was quite invisible. But the results most decidedly were not.

The piece of rock was a heavy thing and twice as big as my head, but almost immediately after the switch was turned on, it rose like a toy balloon and drifted to the ceiling; and there it stayed, bobbing about with every slight current, while I stared at it with open mouth and the professor rubbed his freckled, pudgy hands together and beamed.

At last I regained my voice and burst into frantic congratulations. “Professor,” I cried, “this is the biggest thing you’ve ever done! Why, there’s millions in this. The burdens of the world will be lifted from its shoulders. A hundred inventions will grow out of this one discovery! We can make anti-gravity machines and sell them by the mil-lion! This will be the biggest thing since the gasoline engine. It’ll turn the world upside down!”

The professor beamed again. He caught a portion of my enthusiasm and patted his box affectionately. “This is only a very crude affair, Clement,” he protested. “Just wait until I show you my perfected model. It will work on anything, not just boulders. And I think it will be far more compact, too.”

“Well, we sat there in the lab for an hour or more, discussing the possibilities of the apparatus. The professor saw only the fact itself; he had made a machine that produced weightlessness, and that was that. But I am a reader of science fiction, and I have read a dozen times of the possibilities of antigravity; so I was able to point out any number of ways in which the principle could be applied. When I parted from the professor at last, we were both flooded with enthusiasm over what was to come.

CHAPTER II - Catastrophe!

For the following two weeks, I did my best to control my impatience while the professor worked on his improved model. At last, early one sum-mer evening, the long-expected call came and I hurried over to his house to inspect the finished invention. The professor met me at the door with an apologetic look on his face.

“I’m afraid I must postpone my demonstration, Clement,” he said regretfully. “My very good friend, Dr. Hayland, has just called me and requested my presence at his home immediately.”

“Hop in,” I said, a little disappointed. “I’ll drive you over to Hayland’s and maybe you can complete your

business and get back in time to show me your gadget, even yet.”

Stillwell thanked me and squeezed himself into the car beside me, and we started on our way. We had gone but half a block, however, when there was a whishing sigh from the right front tire and I drew up to the curb and stopped, gritting my teeth to suppress an oath.

“Puncture!” I said wrathfully. “It would happen at a time like this. And— Oh, my gosh!”

“What’s the matter?” Stillwell looked at me anxiously.

“My jack! I left it at home in the garage. Where in thunder can I get a jack around here?”

The professor was puzzled for a moment, then: “Clement, wait a moment till I run back home. I’ll give you a demonstration of my perfected degravitator and supply a jack of sorts at the same time.”

He squirmed out of the machine and waddled hastily up the street in the direction of his home. A minute or two and he appeared again, carrying a small object in his hand. When he reached the machine I saw, to my surprise, that the object resembled a rather complicated pistol.

“Here’s the degravitator, Clement. What do you think of it, now?” “You mean-” incredulously “that that thing is the whole degravitator?”

“Quite so. The thing is not very complicated. You see, the real work is done by the atoms of the object degravitated. This is only used to initiate the action. Now watch how I utilize it as a jack.”

He directed the “gun” on the front of my machine and squeezed a sort of trigger. As in the more complicated machine, there was no sign of a ray or other form of light, but the machine jumped back an inch or two, and then the front slowly rose an inch or so off the ground. Stillwell snapped off the force and turned to me.

“There now, I think you can fix your tire, eh?”

I nodded and got busy, and in no time the tire was changed and we were scrambling back into the car.

Now whether it was the novelty of the thing or the fact that we were in such a hurry, I do not know; but the fact remains that both Stillwell and I forgot that the front of the car had been rendered weightless until we had gotten into the car and I had started it. But then we were reminded of it, and in no uncertain way. No sooner had I started the thing than the front wheels leaped up like a bucking bronco, and the car dashed merrily down the street on its “hind legs.” I grabbed frantically at the emergency brake and, out of a corner of my eye, I caught a wild glimpse of Stillwell’s pudgy legs, as that adipose gentleman went head over heels into the back of the car. The brakes squeaked wildly, and the front of the car gently settled back to the ground.

Fluttering with excitement, I leaped out of the car and, jerking the rear door open, helped the professor out, not a little upset and bruised. He pulled himself together and, shaking his head dolefully, proceeded to neutralize the front of the car. Then we once more got under way and at last reached Dr. Hayland’s.

Inasmuch as I had no idea how long it would take Stillwell to complete his business with Hayland, I suggested that I wait awhile outside. Stillwell agreed and entered the house, and to my surprise, emerged again in less than a minute. His brow was black as he pushed his way into the machine beside me and: “That was somebody’s idea of a joke,” he snorted. “Hayland hasn’t been in all evening. Some half-wit thought he was being funny. If there’s anything I hate, Clement, it’s misplaced ‘humor.’ Let’s go home.”

His irritation increased rather than diminished as we rode back to his house, for nothing could have ruffled his stupendous dignity more than to be the victim of a practical joke. By the time we reached his home, he was bordering on a case of “jitters.”

“There’ll be no use of my attempting to give you a demonstration tonight, Clement,” he sputtered. “Suppose you just excuse me and come around tomorrow evening.”

So, unable to do otherwise, I offered such sympathy as I could without further hurting his feelings, and

leaving him, I drove off to my home.

I was quite convinced that I would see him no more that day and so you can imagine my surprise, when I drove up to my own house, some ten minutes later, to find my ward, Marjorie Barrett, and my housekeeper, Mrs. Potter, both awaiting me on the porch. They burst into excited cries when they beheld me.

"Professor Stillwell just called up—" began the Pest.

"And he wants you to come right over—" continued Mrs. Potter.

"He says it's terrible. Whatever *it* is," went on Marjorie.

"And he says under no circumstances bring the police," Mrs. Potter added.

"But he wants you to hurry, for he's in a very dangerous situation. And I'm going with you. Move over," and suiting the action to the word, the Pest seated herself beside me and slammed the door. We waved to Mrs. Potter, I spun the car around and we were off.

I quizzed Marjorie all during the ten minute ride back to the professor's house, but learned nothing save what she and the housekeeper had already told me. So it was with uncertainty and peculiar misgivings that I rang the bell at Stillwell's home and waited im-patiently for an answer.

At the second ring, I thought I heard a muffled call from within. I looked questioningly at the Pest, but that young lady brushed etiquette aside by trying the doorknob and striding boldly into the house. I followed and was met by a call from the dining room.

"Clement!" came the familiar booming tones of Stillwell's voice. "Is that you? Come back, for heaven's sake!"

We rushed into the room and I gave a gasp of involuntary amazement. There was no sign of the professor. Then the Pest screamed and pointed to the ceiling. I glanced up, and my gasp was cut short half uttered, to be immediately succeeded by another and larger one. Bobbing about in the air currents occasioned by our entry into the room, like a toy balloon that had escaped from the hands of a child, and resting lightly against the ceiling, was the ponderous, the dignified Professor Isaac N. Stillwell!

CHAPTER III - The Pursuit of the Plunderer

"Stillwell!" I cried incredulously. "How did you get up there? What in the world has happened?"

"I—I was held up. There was a rob-ber here and I was held up."

The Pest looked at him and veiled her astonishment with sarcasm. "You're still being held up, if you ask me," she remarked dryly.

"Please, my dear," groaned the pro-fessor. "This is a most ignoble posi-tion. Please remember this is no time for levity."

"Nor for levitation, *either*, for that matter," insisted the irresponsible one.

The combat between offended dignity and the realization of his dangerous position rendered the professor utterly speechless. He sputtered helplessly for a moment or two until I came to his rescue. I waved the Pest to silence and asked him, in as normal a tone as I could assume, just what had happened and what we could do about it.

"When you left me," the professor explained when at last he could speak again, "I entered the house and at once heard a noise, out here in the dining room. I hastened out, and there he was! It flashed instantly into my mind that that supposed call from Hayland was a hoax to get me out of the house while he pursued his depredations. With a presence of mind which I usually possess at such times, I immediately realized that, unarmed as I was, I was entirely at the mercy of this creature, and, casting about in my mind for some bit of strategy to deceive him, I thought of my degravitator. As you have noticed, its resemblance to a revolver is rather striking, and I depended on it to pass for one, at least until I could gain the upper hand.

“So I immediately drew it from my pocket and demanded that the criminal stand and surrender. His actions, how-ever, were most unexpected. Instead of raising his hand in a gesture of surrender, as would have been the obvious thing to do, the incredible wretch threw himself upon me and seized my wrist.

“We struggled, and due to my unfor-tunate corpulence, I must admit that he had the advantage. In less than a min-ute he had twisted the degravitator from my hand and, directing it full upon my breast, he squeezed the trigger, closing his eyes as he did so, expecting, I suppose, the usual sharp report.

“There was no report, of course, so he immediately opened his eyes again, and by that time, the degravitating in-fluence had acted upon me and, rendered weightless, I was ascending slowly to the ceiling. I was horrified, and the rise was accompanied by a most uncom-fortable feeling of *falling*; but my horror, I believe, was nothing compared to that of the criminal.

“His eyes popped out, for a moment he seemed rooted to the spot, then he uttered a wild cry and fled out through the kitchen and the back door, fright-ened out of his wits! And here is the calamity, Clement — in his fright, he never thought of dropping the degravi-tator, he departed, carrying it with him!”

“The degravitator gone?” This was indeed a calamity. “But, Stillwell, how will you get down?”

“How will I get down, indeed!” cried the once-heavy professor in agony. “It would take me weeks to build another degravitator with which to neutralize my condition. And in the meantime, I should have to float around up here, listening to the crude puns and alleged humor of—of Miss Marjorie.”

“Aw, now, professor, don’t get up in the air over my remarks,” begged the Pest. “I’ll be good. Honest. I’ll—I’ll go out and find your de-what-you-may-call-it. Will that help?”

“That’s it! That’s it, Clement. That’s just what you must do. Go out and find it. Surely the criminal will leave some kind of trace. Please, my friends, say you’ll do that.”

I hastened to assure Stillwell that we would do our best, and Marjorie and I at once hastened out the back door into the yard behind the house. There we stopped, uncertain.

“Do you suppose we’ll find any trace of him?” I asked, dubiously.

For once the Pest was serious. “I don’t suppose we’ll find the slightest sign of him,” she admitted. “But I had to calm the poor old fellow somehow. He was getting all worked up and excited. Now he has hope, anyhow.” She paused and broke into a chuckle. “He was always wanting to lose weight, wasn’t he?” she laughed.

I frowned. I did not share her de-light in poor puns and besides, the con-stant howling of a dog in the next door yard was beginning to get on my nerves. I had noted it, unconsciously, even before we left Stillwell’s house, but now it was definitely forced upon my conscious mind. Darkness had fallen by this time, however, and it was impos-sible to see why the dog was howling. Then a sudden thought came into my mind.

“That dog!” I cried. “Listen!” I hastened over to the low wire fence that separated the two yards, vaulted over it and rushed in the direction of the howl-ing. Sure enough! There, some eight or ten feet in the air, dangling by a chain that was fastened to the front of a dog house, and howling at the top of his voice, was an unfortunate brindle bull pup.

“Marjorie!” I called. “He’s been this way,” and as my eye lit upon an open gateway leading to an alley—“He went out this way.”

Marjorie joined me in the alley and we looked around uncertainly. The alley ended blindly, further along in one direction, but in the other— “Come on!” I shouted. “He must have run down to Blair Street. Maybe Marco, the fruit peddler, can tell us where he went.”

Away we went down the alley, wildly enthused by the unexpected success of our chase. We could see lights in Marco Di Rosa’s fruit store and knew that it was open. We felt sure that if our fugitive had passed that way, Marco would have noticed him. So we sped around the corner with hope in our hearts—and stopped with dismay in our faces.

For there was an awning hanging over the front of Di Rosa's little store and, hanging up in the awning was a huge heterogeneous collection of apples, peaches, cabbages, pineapples and watermelons, in the midst of which struggled futilely the little black-mustached figure of Marco!

"He's been here!" shouted the Pest. "Which way did he go, Marco?"

The little fellow rolled his eyes in her direction, eyes which were almost all white with fear and excitement, but he said never a word.

"Get him inside," I cried. "That's an old awning, and if it ever splits—" I said no more, but looked about for some means to reach the little man. My eye lit on a long pole like a clothes prop and seizing it, I instructed Marco to take hold of it, and so drew him down to where we could grasp him.

Then we brought him into the store and let go of him, and he floated up to the ceiling. The Pest brought him a drink of water and presently his fright began to lessen. I asked him what had happened, but it was some little time before he could answer. Then:

"Look, Mr. Jordan" he stammered. "I'm standin' by my fruit stand, see? Justa standin' there, wond'rin' is the Reds gonna win those pennant. An' aroun' that corner comes a man. Little fella, he's got a gun in he's hand. I'm scared, I make a jump for the door to go inside.

"But I guess that fella think I jump for him. Up come the gun, an' he's pull the trigger ! Santa Maria—I'm scared then. I think—'Gooda-night, Marco, you're sunk now.' But no! Mister Jordan, I don't sink. I'm rise!

"Up I go into the awning, an' up go the apple, up go the peach and up go the cabbage an' the pineapple! An' that feller, he's look more scared than me. He scream an' close his eye—an' away he run!"

"Which way did he go, Marco? We've got to catch him, or you'll never get down again. Tell us which way he went."

Marco pointed down the street. "He's run down there. An' across the street an' around the corner into DeCoursey. I watch him, you bet."

Without more ado, the Pest and I were off. Down Blair, across the street and into DeCoursey Avenue. And as Marco's little fruit store disappeared behind us, we looked down DeCoursey and beheld a most amazing sight. Some little way down the street, two gentlemen sat on the curbstone, two gentlemen clad most properly in full evening togs— white tie, tails, and all the trimmings. As we drew near them, we saw that they sat, not actually on the curbstone, but fully a foot above it, and even before we came up with them, we could hear them discussing the situation in loud but slightly befuddled tones.

"Your conclushions, my dear Dinwiddie, are almost certainly erroneous," the nearest of them was saying. "I have not—have not been drinking to exshess. This is the firshst time I have been drunk since—since Thursday."

"Do not tell me I am wrong, Claypoole, my boy," answered the other. "I—I have been here before. I was in Doak's Sanitarium for two months, one time. Just you wait until the parade begins."

"Parade?" The first one was curi-ous. "I was not under the impression there was to—to be a parade, Dinwid-die."

"There will be," announced Dinwiddie. "There will be elephants and reptiles. There are always elephants and reptiles. Pinks ones, p-probably."

"I am shtill unconvinced," insisted Claypoole. "I shtill claim that the fellow killed us. I f-feel like a dishembodied shpirit—and I am acting like a dishembodied shpirit. How else could I be sitting here on—nothing?"

We had stopped before them, but they paid absolutely no attention to us, going right on with their amazing conversation. The Pest finally interrupted.

"Snap out of it!" she commanded sharply. "This is real. Where did the man go who shot at you?"

Dinwiddie raised a bleary eye. "Shpirit, begone!" he said loftily, and Claypoole, glancing up too, remarked complacently: "Now the animals will be coming."

Exasperated and quick-tempered as usual the Pest suddenly reached forward and gave Claypoole a resounding box on the ear. The result was surprising - the man bounded across the sidewalk, struck up against a building, rose some five feet into the air and slowly, slowly settled back to the sidewalk.

The Pest turned to Dinwiddie. "Come on, now! Which way did he go?"

A glimmer of sobriety flickered through the fog that showed on Dinwiddie's face. "Down that alley," he gestured. "I—I— What's the matter with me?"

"You stay right here!" I commanded. "You and your friend will be in a pretty bad fix if we don't find that fellow." We dashed down the alley, and I shouted to the Pest as I did so:

"The degravitator is weakening. It couldn't raise those fellows more than a foot off the ground."

CHAPTER IV - Happy Ending

The alley in which we found our-selves ran between a big warehouse on one side and the back end of a theater on the other. There were no doors facing the alley in either build-ing, but beyond these a group of slovenly tenements had their rear entrances. We would probably have lost the trail right there had not an incident occurred that brought things to a climax. As we passed one of the tenements, a window crashed above us and an article hurtled to the ground, while the terrified scream of a man followed immediately after. The Pest hurried over to pick up the object—a little wooden box of ciga-rettes.

"I've seen this sort of cigarette before," announced the Pest, excitedly. "I knew a fellow once—" she paused and a disgusted look spread her face— "They're marihuana."

"We haven't time for that now," I exclaimed. "Come on."

"Wait minute. I've got a hunch." She started for the forbidding dirty en-trance of the building, and I followed perforce, if only to protect her. Guided by the cries that still came from above, we forced our way past a slatternly and protesting landlady and dashed up rickety stairs and down a dark hall to the room from which the cries were coming.

We threw open the door—and there he was. We knew that he was the man we sought, at once, for he was hanging like grim death to the edge of a big oak table, his feet kicking wildly in the air above him, while one scream after an-other burst from his lips. And lying on the floor was an object that I immedi-ately identified as the degravitator.

The man saw us and broke into a string of imprecations. "Can't I even die in peace?" he screamed, kicking his legs wildly. "Is everything always goin' against me? I'm nuts, and I can't even kill *myself*, let alone anybody else."

I moved over and recovered the degravitator, narrowly dodging a kick from the floating sinner. I swiped at him angrily, knocked him loose from his grip on the table and he slowly rose to the ceiling. He broke into renewed screams.

"Come on, Pest," I said. "Let's get back to the professor."

"Wait a minute," she demanded. "I want to find out something. What's happened, you? How did you get in this fix?"

The thief eyed her truculently for a moment, and then dropped his eyes, abashed. "I don't know what's wrong with me, lady," he said. "But I guess I got it comin' to me. A friend of mine gave me a pack of muggles ciggies. Said they'd give me nerve. I tried one tonight, just before I tried to raid an old gink's house up on Vance Street. It had the craziest effect. Every time I shot anybody, it looked like they just floated right up into the air. Started right off for heaven, without ever wait-ing to die. It scared me so it drove me about nuts. I come home as fast as I could, just about crazy. I guess I was so scared I tried to bump myself off. stuck that dam' gat to my head and pulled the trigger. Now look at me!"

"We can fix you up," announced the Pest. "But you'll have to come with us. Where can we get some twine?"

"There ought to be a ball of it in the left hand drawer of that chiffonier," the crook said, hopefully. "Do you really think you can fix me up?"

The Pest didn't answer, but went and got the twine. She tied it around his waist and started for the door, with the thief swinging along over her head.

"Take the rest of this twine, Clem," she directed. "We'll need it, before we get back to Stillwell's."

Well to make a long story short, some half an hour later we re-entered Stillwell's home, dragging along in the air behind us one thief, one fruit peddler, one badly scared and two arguing gentlemen in tails. Under Stillwell's direction, I recharged the degravitator, neutralized the entire group and brought them all once more back to argument as to the responsibility, which the Pest at last cut short.

"It's certainly not the fault of Marco or these two—er—gentlemen," she said "And I don't see how any responsible person could blame this poor reefer," she indicated the thief. "And so, professor, it seems that in the last analysis, the blame must fall on you. Oh, I know what you're going to say," she went on as the professor raised his hand in protest. "It's a splendid invention and would lighten the cares and work of the world, I know. But it's not the sort of a thing that should be left lying around like an old pair of socks, where any ignoramus can pick it up and play with it. Put it away, and treat it like the laboratories treat radium, or dis-mantle it and forget it entirely until the world is more ready for it."

The huge professor smiled a little wanly. He was still shaken from his undignified sojourn on the ceiling.

"I think I shall forget it," he decided, meekly, as he tossed the degravitator into a desk drawer.

"Yes, I really think I shall."

The End