

**MEDDLER'S  
MOON**

**BY GEORGE O. SMITH**

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Peter Hedgerly heard the door open and close and he smiled at his reflection in the mirror. He turned partly and called out through the semi-closed bedroom door.

"Sit down, honey. I'll be right out."

Joan Willson was early, he thought, but it made no matter. It merely gave them more time togeth—

"I'll sit down," came a deep, pleasant masculine rumble, "but I'm not your honey!"

Peter hit the door and skidded into the living room, his loose shirttail flying out behind him. "Who're you?" he demanded sharply.

"Please do not be disturbed. Finish dressing," said the stranger. Peter measured him. A few pounds heavier than Peter's one hundred and sixty; an inch taller than Peter's five feet eleven. About the same sandy blond complexion. The face was wreathed in a beatific smile that in no way matched Peter's exasperation.

"I'm expecting a guest," snapped Peter. "The door was open for ... the guest. Not for stray strangers seeking company or whatever."

"I know. My presence will make no difference."

"No difference?" exploded Peter angrily. "Look, sport, three's a crowd. Technically, you're trespassing. Shall I prove it by calling the police?"

"You may if you wish," replied the stranger. "But I happen to know for certain that you will not."

"No?" snapped Peter. He headed toward the telephone with all of the determination in the world. The stranger watched him tolerantly. Peter reached the table beside the door and reached for the phone. As his hand touched it, the door opened and Joan Willson came in. She gulped at Peter and said: "Oh!"

Peter became aware of the fact that his nether raiment consisted of shoes, socks, paisley-print shorts and a curtailed-shirttailed WPB model shirt.

He echoed Joan's "Oh!"

His ejaculation died like the diminishing wail of a retreating fire siren. That was because the duration of the monosyllabic diphthong exceeded the time necessary for Peter to gain the security of the bedroom where he donned his trousers and wished there were something he could do to cover the blush of embarrassment on his face. His ears especially.

Through the door he heard the stranger say: "Please come in, Miss Willson. Peter's condition is but temporary."

"But why ... what ... and who are you?"

"That's a long story," replied the stranger. He turned and called out to Peter. "I told you you'd not call the police!"

"Police!" exclaimed Joan. "Peter, is ... is—?"

"Not at all," said the stranger, interrupting her and intercepting the words which had been intended for Peter. "I've had too little time to make explanation. I'm Joseph Hedgerly."

"Relative of his?" asked Joan.

"Quite. And quite close."

Peter called: "Never heard of you."

"You will," replied Hedgerly. "You see, Peter, I'm here to help you."

"And if I need no help?"

"You do."

"Let me be judge, huh?" snapped Peter.

"You're in poor position to judge. That's why this help is thrust upon you, so to speak. After a bit you'll understand."

"Thanks," said Peter. Slowly he came into the living room again and faced Joan, still flushed.

"Honest, Joan," he started, but the girl shrugged. "Don't apologize for a sheer accident," she said.

"It was no accident," said Hedgerly.

Peter whirled. "Look, chaperone, who invited you in? As for any relation of mine? Are you?"

Hedgerly arose carefully. "I am Joseph Hedgerly, your grandson."

Joan looked at Peter and laughed heartily. "Peter Faust Hedgerly. Having a thirty-odd year grandson is quite a record for such as you," she told him. "You will only be thirty-two next birthday."

Peter turned to the other angrily. "Can it," he snapped. "Grandson my ankle!"

"I am your grandson."

"Yeah ... sure. Shall I call the cops now?"

"You could, but you will not."

"Oh spinach!" Peter headed for the phone again but the stranger said, quietly, "Might listen to me, Peter."

Peter stopped, turned, and said: "Explain—and explain fast!"

"You are a physicist with the Abstract Laboratory at Chicago. You also tinker in your study here. Your son—my father—will take up

home-tinkering also, and your son's son—myself—will eventually discover the secret of time travel. I've done this. I am now here to see that things evolve with a minimum of effort."

Peter shrugged. "You could have saved your time," he said. "If you'd not interfered, I'd have asked Miss Willson to marry me."

"That's the point," smiled Hedgerly. "You see, Peter, my grandmother's name was not Willson, nor Joan. Peter Hedgerly—according to the family history—married a girl by the name of Marie Baker."

"Never heard of her," grunted Peter.

"You will," smiled Hedgerly. He turned to Joan. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I have nothing against you: in fact you appear to be of the finest. You will naturally understand there is nothing personal in any of this. It is merely a matter of historic fact that Peter will marry Marie Baker."

"Mr. Hedgerly," she said, "I dislike you thoroughly. Furthermore, I'm not too certain that history is as solid as you think. Until further notice, then, I hereby accept Peter's sidelong proposal of a moment ago."

"Joan!" cried Peter running forward and folding the girl in his arms.

"Very fetching," observed Hedgerly with the air of a man observing the antics of a couple of goldfish in the proverbial bowl. "Considerable boundless and mutual enthusiasm, but both terribly and unhappily misdirected. In other words a sheer waste of time and energy."

Joan and Peter unclinked and faced Hedgerly. "We like it," they said in chorus.

Hedgerly nodded understandingly. "But Marie Baker wouldn't."

"Let's go out, Peter," pleaded the girl earnestly. "This unwelcome bird makes me feel like a female homewrecker!"

Hedgerly beamed. "Do go," he said. "And enjoy yourselves until I can locate Peter's future wife—my grandmother."

The big machine should have been quiet according to theory. It had no moving mechanical parts to hum or gears to clash nor levers to chatter. It had for its moving-member a magnetic field that varied on a pure sine wave of intensity from a terrific flux-density in one direction, through zero, and thence to an equally terrific flux-density in the opposite polarity. At one newspaper interview as the machine was being built some reporter had erroneously noted that the magnetic field strength at maximum was strong enough to affect the iron in your blood. This was intended for sheer hyperbole, but the fact remained that the magnetic field between the big pole pieces was strong enough to warp the path of light. Well, the shift *could* be measured with the most delicate of optical instruments.

Theoretically, a varying magnetic field should not make a sound.

Actually, it did. The field at maximum was strong enough to cause deep magnetostriction of the magnetic metals of the machine. They vibrated in sympathy with the varying field: their dimensions changing enough to set up sound waves in the air of the room.

So the theoretically silent machine actually made a clear humming roar that shattered the eardrums and seemed to press offensively on the skulls of those working within the chamber.

Even Peter Hedgerly found it oppressing after an hour or two, and he of all men should have been used to it.

He removed his eye from the observing telescope and blinked to relieve the strain. He looked up at Joan, nodded affably, and his right hand snapped the main switch.

The terrible humming roar died. "Hello," he said brightly. "What brings you here?"

Joan Willson laughed sourly. She handed Peter a newspaper. Peter bent his head to read:

Personal! Marie Baker, Age 27, weight 114, brunette, brown eyes, minute scar on left thigh. Social Security Number 340-01-6077 please contact—

"I don't want her!" stormed Peter.

"The advertisement says you do," cooed Joan.

"Now look, Joan—"

She laughed and laid a cool hand on his cheek affectionately. "I know you don't. But I did want to point out that your—grandson—is wasting no time."

Another voice interrupted. "Naturally not," interjected Hedgerly. "After all, I'm here to see that things do go according to history."

"History be damned," snapped Peter. "I—"



"Really have very little to say about it," smiled Hedgerly. "You'll do exactly as ... as you did!"

"Then," blazed Peter, "why not let nature take its course? If I'm to meet and commit matrimony with this Baker dame, I'll do it!"

For the first time, Hedgerly looked less than the complete master of everything he surveyed. "It is also historic fact," he said in a sepulchral tone, "that I add my efforts to make history satisfy itself. You see," he said, brightening, "how it all comes out!" He dug into an inside pocket and came up with a wallet. From it he extracted a newspaper clipping yellow and brittle with age. "Here is the original. I just copied it for the advertisement."



Peter took the aged clipping and read it. His hands shook and the clipping fell apart.

"No matter," smiled Hedgerly. "Its job is done."

"Is done?" demanded Peter.

"Of course. Marie Baker will be at your apartment this evening."

"I'll scratch her bald-headed," threatened Joan.

Hedgerly shook his head. "No, you won't," he said positively. Then he looked down at Peter and his eyes ran over the experimental setup. "It won't work," he said to Peter. "You're on the wrong track. It is impossible to accelerate and focus and direct the neutron. The neutron, possessing no charge, is therefore unaffected by either magnetic or electrostatic fields."

Peter looked up quietly. "I've evidence to the contrary," he said. "We believe that the neutron does possess a charge: that it is theoretically impossible for anything to exist without some charge, though the charge may be exceedingly minute. We believe the neutron to be possessed of a charge of plus or minus—depending upon the moment of intrinsic angular momentum—ten to the minus fifteenth electrostatic units less than that of the electron. Therefore—"

"You will find that the experimental evidence you get is impure," said Hedgerly. "You'll save time if you abandon this project."

"Indeed? And what should I take up?"

"You'll do history a better turn if you take to investigating the magnetic properties of mass."

"Is that a matter of history, too?"

Hedgerly shrugged. "If I told you all I know about it," he said in a superior tone that made Peter want to commit homicide, "then you'd have too much time to sit around and feel frustrated because fate is a written book."

"Spinach," snorted Peter. His hand hit the main switch again and the humming roar leaped out at them from all sides. Peter grinned as he noted the wrist watch on Hedgerly's arm. Unless the character had a one thousand per cent nonmagnetic movement, the insides by now would be keeping the Devil's Own Time.

It was nine o'clock. For the eleventh time since dinner, Peter leaned out of his study and called: "Now?"

Hedgerly shook his head. "Not yet," he said.

"Well," said Peter this time. "Come in here. I'm on the trail of something."

"I know," replied Hedgerly. "You've discovered the Hedgerly Effect."

"The what?" stumbled Peter.

"Named after its discoverer. You're quite famous in the future, you know," replied Hedgerly.

"What is this Hedgerly Effect?"

"The one you've just discovered," replied Hedgerly.

Joan Willson, present because of sheer curiosity pertaining to this Marie Baker creature whom she was prepared to dislike on sight, looked up from her book and drawled: "Oh brilliant repartee. You sound like that Cyril Smith routine that goes 'Who's he? Who's

who? Him, the man in the picture. What picture?' And so forth for about an hour."

Peter smiled. "I suppose," he said. "But it's his fault, not mine. This effect is a sort of artificial generation of gravitic force."

Hedgerly nodded. "The first historic discovery that proves the relationship between magnetic phenomena and gravitic force. Now we're on the right trail," he concluded. Hedgerly walked over to the small barrette and mixed himself a drink. He lounged back against the bar and lifted his glass. "To my grandfather," he said, "The discoverer of the Hedgerly Effect!"

Peter looked at Joan weakly. "It's fratricide to kill a brother, patricide to kill a father, homicide to kill just anybody, infanticide to kill your son, but what is it to kill a grandson?"

Joan looked Hedgerly up and down and her lip curled in derision. "Insecticide," she snapped. "Ignore him. Maybe he'll go away. But Peter, what does this gravitic effect mean?"

"I'm not too certain," replied Peter wrinkling his brow. "Of course, since gravitic fields do act upon mass without charge, we can now filter out, accelerate, and focus the neutron—or we will be able to as soon as we get this effect refined. And if we can generate gravitic fields at will, we can nullify the gravitic mass or gravitic attraction of masses. That means a complete revision of all the mass-ratio tables pertaining to space rockets. In fact, it may do away with rockets entirely. And the following is conjecture but may be possible:

"The reason that the limiting velocity is the speed of light is due to the fact that the mass approaches infinity as the speed of light is

reached. That means that no possible energetic principle can be used to attain the speed of light since this increase of mass is a statement of the mass-energy put into the article accelerated. In other words, Joan, to increase the velocity of anything to the speed of light requires that you pack into it the equivalent energy required to raise its mass to infinity. Meaning of course, infinite energy.

"However, if this local generation of a gravitic field can be used to nullify mass, we can make a space-ship that need not increase in mass as its velocity increases.

"Providing that my reasoning is any good. This is just conjecture and guess. I don't know yet how much this gravitic generator will cover."

"You've done a fair job so far," said Hedgerly, mixing another drink. "Of course, you'll let it drop there."

"Let it drop?" yelled Peter. "With a thing like this at my doorstep? With the twinkle of a slide rule I can become the Originator of Interstellar Travel, and you expect me to let it slip?"

Hedgerly smiled tolerantly. "The discoverer of the Hedgerly Effect does not become involved with space travel," he pointed out with a knowing air. "He does become the layer of the cornerstone for Time Travel, which we believe is as important."

Peter looked glumly at Joan. "Methinks of suicide," he groaned. "I invent Time Travel and for the next million years my invention becomes the curse of mankind. Pandora's Box never let out any trouble-scorpion as bad as people like my temporally-gadding grandson!"

"Now, grandpop, don't be bitter," laughed Hedgerly.

"Grandpop?" yelled Peter. "I'll—"

The doorbell rang, interrupting a string of threats. Hedgerly stepped springily to the door, opened it, and said: "Please come in, Miss Baker. We're expecting you."

Peter whistled.

Joan hissed.

The room became three degrees warmer.

Miss Marie Baker was curvaceous. Miss Marie Baker was dressed to prove it. Miss Marie Baker knew it. The Petty-Girl calendar on Peter's living room wall took on a drab and lumpy appearance and on the table beside the divan, a magazine cover became blank as the model headed for the powder room.

Marie Baker spoke, and Arthur Sullivan moved in his grave because the sound of her voice was that reminiscent of that great Lost Chord of music. "I'm quite mystified," she said.

Hedgerly took her slender hand. "Please come in," he said. "And we'll try to explain. You've come, Marie, to be introduced to your future husband!"

The door behind Marie filled again—and filled is the proper term. He stood six feet four, the floor creaked under his two hundred and twelve pounds of sheer muscle, and the litheness of his step carried him with pantherine grace. "May I point out," he said in a voice that reeked of Harvard, Cambridge, and a complete disregard of the letter 'R,' "that Miss Baker may be already acquainted with her future husband?"

Hedgerly faced the giant. "Please," he said in a pained voice. "I'm having enough trouble now without your unwelcome aid. Any relationship between you and Marie Baker must shortly become, at best, platonic."

A small brass figurine of Rodin's Discobolus took a sidelong look and made the brazen observation that being platonic with such as Miss Baker was an idea never suggested by his friend Plato. Plato had too much sense.

"Just how do you figure in this?" demanded the giant.

"Have we met?" asked Hedgerly.

"I'm Anthony Graydon. And my query goes still."

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Graydon. I trust your intentions toward Miss Baker are simple?"

"Miss Baker happens to be wearing my engagement ring," returned Graydon. Hedgerly looked, and saw a bit of glitter about the size of a small pigeon's egg on her left hand.

Hedgerly shook his head sadly. "May I introduce Miss Willson?" he suggested. "Miss Willson, will you meet Mr. Graydon? Perhaps, Mr. Graydon, the no-longer-needed engagement ring will fit Miss Willson."

Anthony Graydon looked down on the time-traveling man with grand contempt. "You have all the sheer, cockeyed assurance of an egomaniac," he said. "Is Marie supposed to marry you?"

"Oh no," explained Hedgerly. "She'll marry him. Miss Baker, may I present Mr. Hedgerly. Marie, this is Peter."

He took Anthony by one arm and Joan Willson by the other and steered them towards the door. "Let us leave them alone," he said. "They must become acquainted."

"Look," snapped Anthony, "this has gone far enough—"

"Please," interrupted Hedgerly, "this is serious. Miss Willson will tell you that what I say is true, however unwilling she is to face the bitter truth. It is only a matter of time before Miss Baker becomes Mrs. Peter Hedgerly."

The door closed softly behind the three of them before Tony Graydon turned to Hedgerly and said: "What kind of high-octane are you using in your crystal ball these days, Swami?"

"Swami? But please, this is not the work of a charlatan. This is historic fact."

"Sure. So is my girl marrying that bird, huh?"

"They will marry," replied Hedgerly.

"Yeah? That's not very complimentary to me," snapped Graydon. "I've been number One man with Marie for quite some time now. I hardly think—"

"Give them time," replied Hedgerly succinctly. "In a short period, the propinquity in which they are thrust—"

Graydon whirled Hedgerly around by grabbing both lapels of the coat in one large, well manicured hand. "Propinquity!" exploded Graydon in full volume, which was enough to cause endless echoes up and down the corridor. Then even the echoes had echoes for a full minute.



Joan Willson backed out of the way. The hand that enclosed both lapels of Hedgerly's coat looked well manicured and in excellent care, but she had a firm hunch that *well-tended* included the matter of keeping it firm, hard, and dangerous. Graydon was no cream puff, and of a size where even a cream puff is respected.

But Graydon did not dust his knuckles off against Hedgerly's nose. Breeding came to the fore, and Graydon let the other man relax. "Propinquity," he said in a level voice that sounded very firm, "presupposes that you and I and possibly Miss Willson are going to spend some time in hurling my fiancee and that character together."

"Of course we are," replied Hedgerly, with all of the assurance in the world.

"We—are—not!"

"Oh, but we are," said Hedgerly. "And I'll tell you why."

Graydon smiled bitterly. "This," he said to Joan, "is going to be good." He looked at Hedgerly. "It had better be!"

Marie Baker shrugged her shapely shoulders and looked very puzzled. "I don't understand," she said.

"Miss Baker, please let me explain," pleaded Peter. She nodded, and Peter plunged into the explanation as completely as he could. Then—

"Peter," she said quietly and very sincerely, "I'd hate to hurt your feelings, but I'm afraid that ... that—" her magnificent voice trailed off weakly as she fumbled with the pint-sized diamond on her left hand.

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