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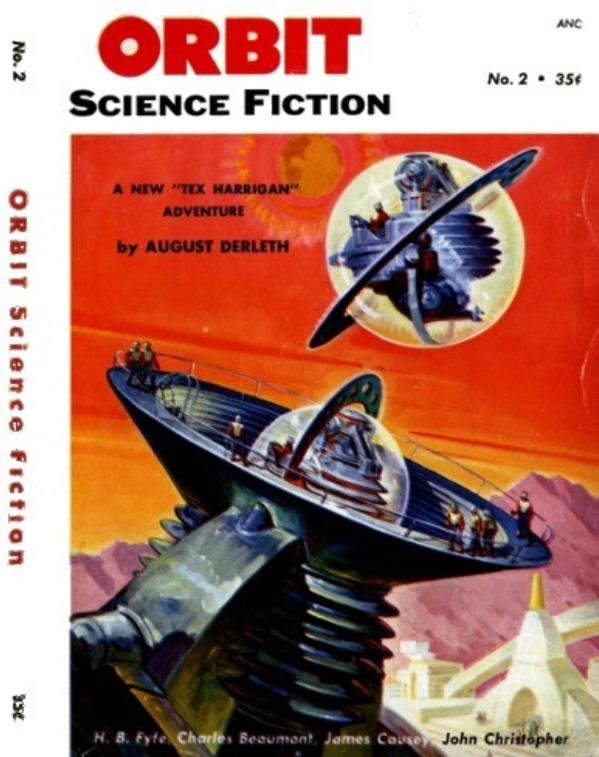
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TIME AND THE WOMAN \*\*\*



## TIME and the WOMAN

By Dewey, G. Gordon

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HER ONLY PASSION  
WAS BEAUTY—  
BEAUTY WHICH  
WOULD LAST  
FOREVER. AND FOR IT  
—SHE'D DO  
ANYTHING!

Ninon stretched. And purred, almost. There was something lazily catlike in her flexing; languid, yet ferally alert. The silken softness of her couch yielded to her body as she rubbed against it in sensual delight. There was almost the litheness of youth in her movements.

It was true that some of her joints seemed to have a hint of stiffness in them, but only *she* knew it. And if some of the muscles beneath her polished skin did not respond with quite the resilience of the youth they once had, only *she* knew that, too. *But they would again*, she told herself fiercely.

She caught herself. She had let down her guard for an instant, and a frown had started. She banished it imperiously. Frowns—just one frown—could start a wrinkle! And nothing was as stubborn as a wrinkle. One soft, round, white, long-nailed finger touched here, and here, and there—the corners of her eyes, the corners of her mouth, smoothing them.

Wrinkles acknowledged only one master, the bio-knife of the facial surgeons. But the bio-knife could not thrust deep enough to excise the stiffness in a joint; was not clever enough to remold the outlines of a figure where they were beginning to blur and—sag.

No one else could see it—yet. But Ninon could!

Again the frown almost came, and again she scoured it fiercely into the back of her mind. Time was her enemy. But she had had other enemies, and destroyed them, one way or another, cleverly or ruthlessly as circumstances demanded. Time, too, could be destroyed. Or enslaved. Ninon sorted through her meagre store of remembered reading. Some old philosopher had said, "If you can't whip 'em, join 'em!" Crude, but apt.

Ninon wanted to smile. But smiles made wrinkles, too. She was content to feel that sureness of power in her grasp—the certain knowledge that she, first of all people, would turn Time on itself and destroy it. She would be youthful again. She would thread through the ages to come, like a silver needle drawing a golden filament through the layer on layer of the cloth of years that would engarment her eternal youth. Ninon knew how.

Her shining, gray-green eyes strayed to the one door in her apartment through which no man had ever gone. There the exercising machines; the lotions; the unguents; the diets; the radioactive drugs; the records of endocrine transplantations, of blood transfusions. She dismissed them contemptuously. Toys! The mirages of a pseudo-youth. She would leave them here for someone else to use in masking the downhill years.

There, on the floor beside her, was the answer she had sought so long. A book. "Time in Relation to Time." The name of the author, his academic record in theoretical physics, the cautious, scientific wording of his postulates, meant nothing to her. The one thing that had meaning for her was that Time could be manipulated. And she would manipulate it. For Ninon!

The door chimes tinkled intimately. Ninon glanced at her watch—Robert was on time. She arose from the couch, made sure that the light was behind her at just the right angle so he could see the outlines of her figure through the sheerness of her gown, then went to the door and opened it.

A young man stood there. Young, handsome, strong, his eyes aglow with the desire he felt, Ninon knew, when he saw her. He took one quick step forward to clasp her in his strong young arms.

"Ninon, my darling," he whispered huskily.

Ninon did not have to make her voice throaty any more, and that annoyed her too. Once she had had to do it deliberately. But now, through the years, it had deepened.

"Not yet, Robert," she whispered. She let him feel the slight but firm resistance so nicely calculated to breach his own; watched the deepening flush of his cheeks with the clinical sureness that a thousand such experiences with men had given her.

Then, "Come in, Robert," she said, moving back a step. "I've been waiting for you."

She noted, approvingly, that Robert was in his spaceman's uniform, ready for the morrow's flight, as he went past her to the couch. She pushed the button which closed and locked the door, then seated herself beside the young spaceman on the silken couch.

His hands rested on her shoulders and he turned her until they faced each other.

"Ninon," he said, "you are so beautiful. Let me look at you for a long time—to carry your image with me through all of time and space."

Again Ninon let him feel just a hint of resistance, and risked a tiny pout. "If you could just take me with you, Robert...."

Robert's face clouded. "If I only could!" he said wistfully. "If there were only room. But this is an experimental flight—no more than two can go."

Again his arms went around her and he leaned closer.

"Wait!" Ninon said, pushing him back.

"Wait? Wait for what?" Robert glanced at his watch. "Time is running out. I have to be at the spaceport by dawn—three hours from now."

Ninon said, "But that's three hours, Robert."

"But I haven't slept yet tonight. There's been so much to do. I should rest a little."

"I'll be more than rest for you."

"Yes, Ninon.... Oh, yes."

"Not yet, darling." Again her hands were between them. "First, tell me about the flight tomorrow."

The young spaceman's eyes were puzzled, hurt. "But Ninon, I've told you before ... there is so much of you that I want to remember ... so little time left ... and you'll be gone when I get back...."

Ninon let her gray-green eyes narrow ever so slightly as she leaned away from him. But he blundered on.

"... or very old, no longer the Ninon I know ... oh, all right. But you know all this already. We've had space flight for years, but only rocket-powered, restricting us to our own system. Now we have a new kind of drive. Theoretically we can travel faster than light—how many times faster we don't know yet. I'll start finding out tomorrow, with the first test flight of the ship in which the new drive is installed. If it works, the universe is ours—we can go anywhere."

"Will it work?" Ninon could not keep the avid greediness out of her voice.

Robert said, hesitantly, "We think it will. I'll know better by this time tomorrow."

"What of you—of me—. What does this mean to us—to people?"

Again the young spaceman hesitated. "We ... we don't know, yet. We think that time won't have the same meaning to everyone...."

"... When you travel faster than light. Is that it?"

"Well ... yes. Something like that."

"And I'll be—old—or dead, when you get back? If you get back?"

Robert leaned forward and buried his face in the silvery-blonde hair which swept down over Ninon's shoulders.

"Don't say it, darling," he murmured.

This time Ninon permitted herself a wrinkling smile. If she was right, and she knew she was, it could make no difference now. There would be no wrinkles—there would be only the soft flexible skin, naturally soft and flexible, of real youth.

She reached behind her, over the end of the couch, and pushed three buttons. The light, already soft, dimmed slowly to the faintest of glows; a suave, perfumed dusk as precisely calculated as was the exact rate at which she let all resistance ebb from her body.

Robert's voice was muffled through her hair. "What were those clicks?" he asked.

Ninon's arms stole around his neck. "The lights," she whispered, "and a little automatic warning to tell you when it's time to go...."

The boy did not seem to remember about the third click. Ninon was not quite ready to tell him, yet. But she would....

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Two hours later a golden-voiced bell chimed, softly, musically. The lights slowly brightened to no more than the lambent glow which was all that Ninon permitted. She ran her fingers through the young spaceman's tousled hair and shook him gently.

"It's time to go, Robert," she said.

Robert fought back from the stubborn grasp of sleep. "So soon?" he mumbled.

"And I'm going with you," Ninon said.

This brought him fully awake. "I'm sorry, Ninon. You can't!" He sat up and yawned, stretched, the healthy stretch of resilient youth. Then he reached for the jacket he had tossed over on a chair.

Ninon watched him with envious eyes, waiting until he was fully alert.

"Robert!" she said, and the youth paused at the sharpness of her voice. "How old are you?"

"I've told you before, darling—twenty-four."

"How old do you think I am?"

He gazed at her in silent curiosity for a moment, then said, "Come to think of it, you've never told me. About twenty-two or -three, I'd say."

"Tomorrow is my birthday. I'll be fifty-two."

He stared at her in shocked amazement. Then, as his gaze went over the smooth lines of her body, the amazement gave way to disbelief, and he chuckled. "The way you said it, Ninon, almost had me believing you. You can't possibly be that old, or anywhere near it. You're joking."

Ninon's voice was cold. She repeated it: "I am fifty-two years old. I knew your father, before you were born."

This time she could see that he believed it. The horror he felt was easy to read on his face while he struggled to speak. "Then ... God help me ... I've been making love to ... an old woman!" His voice was low, bitter, accusing.

Ninon slapped him.

He swayed slightly, then his features froze as the red marks of her fingers traced across his left cheek. At last he bowed, mockingly, and said, "Your pardon, Madame. I forgot myself. My father taught me to be respectful to my elders."

For that Ninon could have killed him. As he turned to leave, her hand sought the tiny, feather-light beta-gun cunningly concealed in the folds of her gown. But the driving force of her desire made her stay her hand.

"Robert!" she said in peremptory tones.

The youth paused at the door and glanced back, making no effort to conceal the loathing she had aroused in him. "What do you want?"

Ninon said, "You'll never make that flight without me.... Watch!"

Swiftly she pushed buttons again. The room darkened, as before. Curtains at one end divided and rustled back, and a glowing screen sprang to life on the wall revealed behind them. And there, in life and movement and color and sound and dimension, she—and Robert—projected themselves, together on the couch, beginning at the moment Ninon had pressed the three buttons earlier. Robert's arms were around her, his face buried in the hair falling over her shoulders....

The spaceman's voice was doubly bitter in the darkened room. "So that's it," he said. "A recording! Another one for your collection, I suppose. But of what use is it to you? I have neither money nor power. I'll be gone from this Earth in an hour. And you'll be gone from it, permanently—at your age—before I get back. I have nothing to lose, and you have nothing to gain."

Venomous with triumph, Ninon's voice was harsh even to her ears. "On the contrary, my proud and impetuous young spaceman, I have much to gain, more than you could ever understand. When it was announced that you were to be trained to command this experimental flight I made it my business to find out everything possible about you. One other man is going. He too has had the same training, and could take over in your place. A third man has also been trained, to stand by in reserve. You are supposed to have rested and slept the entire night. If the Commandant of Space Research knew that you had not...."

"I see. That's why you recorded my visit tonight. But I leave in less than an hour. You'd never be able to tell Commander Pritchard in time to make any difference, and he'd never come here to see...."

Ninon laughed mirthlessly, and pressed buttons again. The screen changed, went blank for a moment, then figures appeared again. On the couch were she and a man, middle-aged, dignified in appearance, uniformed. Blane Pritchard, Commandant of Space Research. His arms were around her, and his face was buried in her hair. She let the recording run for a moment, then shut it off and turned up the lights.

To Robert, she said, "I think Commander Pritchard would be here in five minutes if I called and told him that I have information which seriously affects the success of the flight."

The young spaceman's face was white and stricken as he stared for long moments, wordless, at Ninon. Then in defeated tones he said, "You scheming witch! What do you want?"

There was no time to gloat over her victory. That would come later. Right now minutes counted. She snatched up a cloak, pushed Robert out through the door and hurried him along the hall and out into the street where his car waited.

"We must hurry," she said breathlessly. "We can get to the spaceship ahead of schedule, before your flight partner arrives, and be gone from Earth before anyone knows what is happening. I'll be with you, in his place."

Robert did not offer to help her into the car, but got in first and waited until she closed the door behind her, then sped away from the curb and through the streets to the spaceport.

Ninon said, "Tell me, Robert, isn't it true that if a clock recedes from Earth at the speed of light, and if we could watch it as it did so, it would still be running but it would never show later time?"

The young man said gruffly, "Roughly so, according to theory."

"And if the clock went away from Earth faster than the speed of light, wouldn't it run backwards?"

The answer was curtly cautious. "It might appear to."

"Then if people travel at the speed of light they won't get any older?"

Robert flicked a curious glance at her. "If you could watch them from Earth they appear not to. But it's a matter of relativity...."

Ninon rushed on. She had studied that book carefully. "And if people travel faster than light, a lot faster, they'll grow younger, won't they?"

Robert said, "So that's what's in your mind." He busied himself with parking the car at the spaceport, then went on: "You want to go back in the past thirty years, and be a girl again. While I grow younger, too, into a boy, then a child, a baby, at last nothing...."

"I'll try to be sorry for you, Robert."

Ninon felt again for her beta-gun as he stared at her for a long minute, his gaze a curious mixture of amusement and pity. Then, "Come on," he said flatly, turning to lead the way to the gleaming space ship which poised, towering like a spire, in the center of the blast-off basin. And added, "I think I shall enjoy this trip, Madame, more than you will."

The young man's words seemed to imply a secret knowledge that Ninon did not possess. A sudden chill of apprehension rippled through her, and almost she turned back. But no ... there was the ship! There was youth; and beauty; and the admiration of men, real admiration. Suppleness in her muscles and joints again. No more diets. No more transfusions. No more transplantations. No more the bio-knife. She could smile again, or frown again. And after a few years she could make the trip again ... and again....

---

The space ship stood on fiery tiptoes and leaped from Earth, high into the heavens, and out and away. Past rusted Mars. Past the busy asteroids. Past the sleeping giants, Jupiter and Saturn. Past pale Uranus and Neptune; and frigid, shivering Pluto. Past a senseless, flaming comet rushing inward towards its rendezvous with the Sun. And on out of the System into the steely blackness of space where the stars were hard, burnished points of light, unwinking, motionless; eyes—eyes staring at the ship, staring through the ports at Ninon where she lay, stiff and bruised and sore, in the contoured acceleration sling.

The yammering rockets cut off, and the ship seemed to poise on the ebon lip of a vast Stygian abyss.

Joints creaking, muscles protesting, Ninon pushed herself up and out of the sling against the artificial gravity of the ship. Robert was already seated at the controls.

"How fast are we going?" she asked; and her voice was rusty and harsh.

"Barely crawling, astronomically," he said shortly. "About forty-six thousand miles a minute."

"Is that as fast as the speed of light?"

"Hardly, Madame," he said, with a condescending chuckle.

"Then make it go faster!" she screamed. "And faster and faster—hurry! What are we waiting for?"

The young spaceman swivelled about in his seat. He looked haggard and drawn from the strain of the long acceleration. Despite herself, Ninon could feel the sagging in her own face; the sunkenness of her eyes. She felt tired, hating herself for it—hating having this young man see her.

He said, "The ship is on automatic control throughout. The course is plotted in advance; all operations are plotted. There is nothing we can do but wait. The light drive will cut in at the planned time."

"Time! Wait! That's all I hear!" Ninon shrieked. "Do something!"

Then she heard it. A low moan, starting from below the limit of audibility, then climbing, up and up and up and up, until it was a nerve-plucking whine that tore into her brain like a white-hot tuning fork. And still it climbed, up beyond the range of hearing, and up and up still more, till it could no longer be felt. But Ninon, as she stumbled back into the acceleration sling, sick and shaken, knew it was still there. The light drive!

She watched through the ports. The motionless, silent stars were moving now, coming toward them, faster and faster, as the ship swept out of the galaxy, shooting into her face like blazing pebbles from a giant slingshot.

She asked, "How fast are we going now?"

Robert's voice sounded far off as he replied, "We are approaching the speed of light."

"Make it go faster!" she cried. "Faster! Faster!"

She looked out the ports again; looked back behind them—and saw shining specks of glittering blackness falling away to melt into the sootiness of space. She shuddered, and knew without

asking that these were stars dropping behind at a rate greater than light speed.

"Now how fast are we going?" she asked. She was sure that her voice was stronger; that strength was flowing back into her muscles and bones.

"Nearly twice light speed."

"Faster!" she cried. "We must go much faster! I must be young again. Youthful, and gay, and alive and happy.... Tell me, Robert, do you feel younger yet?"

He did not answer.

---

Ninon lay in the acceleration sling, gaining strength, and—she knew—youth. Her lost youth, coming back, to be spent all over again. How wonderful! No woman in all of time and history had ever done it. She would be immortal; forever young and lovely. She hardly noticed the stiffness in her joints when she got to her feet again—it was just from lying in the sling so long.

She made her voice light and gay. "Are we not going very, very fast, now, Robert?"

He answered without turning. "Yes. Many times the speed of light."

"I knew it ... I knew it! Already I feel much younger. Don't you feel it too?"

He did not answer, and Ninon kept on talking. "How long have we been going, Robert?"

He said, "I don't know ... depends on where you are."

"It must be hours ... days ... weeks. I should be hungry. Yes, I think I am hungry. I'll need food, lots of food. Young people have good appetites, don't they, Robert?"

He pointed to the provisions locker, and she got food out and made it ready. But she could eat but a few mouthfuls. *It's the excitement*, she told herself. After all, no other woman, ever, had gone back through the years to be young again....

---

Long hours she rested in the sling, gaining more strength for the day when they would land back on Earth and she could step out in all the springy vitality of a girl of twenty. And then as she watched through the ingenious ports she saw the stars of the far galaxies beginning to wheel about through space, and she knew that the ship had reached the halfway point and was turning to speed back through space to Earth, uncounted light-years behind them—or before them. And she would still continue to grow younger and younger....

She gazed at the slightly-blurred figure of the young spaceman on the far side of the compartment, focussing her eyes with effort. "You are looking much younger, Robert," she said. "Yes, I think you are becoming quite boyish, almost childish, in appearance."

He nodded slightly. "You may be right," he said.

"I must have a mirror," she cried. "I must see for myself how much younger I have become. I'll hardly recognize myself...."

"There is no mirror," he told her.

"No mirror? But how can I see...."

"Non-essentials were not included in the supplies on this ship. Mirrors are not essential—to men."

The mocking gravity in his voice infuriated her. "Then you shall be my mirror," she said. "Tell me, Robert, am I not now much younger? Am I not becoming more and more beautiful? Am I not in truth the most desirable of women?... But I forget. After all, you are only a boy, by now."

He said, "I'm afraid our scientists will have some new and interesting data on the effects of time in relation to time. Before long we'll begin to decelerate. It won't be easy or pleasant. I'll try to make you as comfortable as possible."

Ninon felt her face go white and stiff with rage. "What do you mean?"

Robert said, coldly brutal, "You're looking your age, Ninon. Every year of your fifty-two!"

Ninon snatched out the little beta-gun, then, leveled it and fired. And watched without remorse as the hungry electrons streamed forth to strike the young spaceman, turning him into a motionless, glowing figure which rapidly became misty and wraith-like, at last to disappear, leaving only a swirl of sparkling haze where he had stood. This too disappeared as its separate particles drifted to the metallite walls of the space ship, discharged their energy and ceased to sparkle, leaving only a thin film of dust over all.

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After a while Ninon got up again from the sling and made her way to the wall. She polished the dust away from a small area of it, trying to make the spot gleam enough so that she could use it for a mirror. She polished a long time, until at last she could see a ghostly reflection of her face in the rubbed spot.

Yes, unquestionably she was younger, more beautiful. Unquestionably Time was being kind to her, giving her back her youth. She was not sorry that Robert was gone—there would be many young men, men her own age, when she got back to Earth. And that would be soon. She must rest more, and be ready.

The light drive cut off, and the great ship slowly decelerated as it found its way back into the galaxy from which it had started. Found its way back into the System which had borne it. Ninon watched through the port as it slid in past the outer planets. Had they changed? No, she could not see that they had—only she had changed—until Saturn loomed up through the port, so close by, it looked, that she might touch it. But Saturn had no rings. Here was change. She puzzled over it a moment, frowning then forgot it when she recognized Jupiter again as Saturn fell behind. Next would be Mars....

But what was this? Not Mars! Not any planet she knew, or had seen before. Yet there, ahead, was Mars! A new planet, where the asteroids had been when she left! Was this the same system? Had there been a mistake in the calculations of the scientists and engineers who had plotted the course of the ship? Was something wrong?

But no matter—she was still Ninon. She was young and beautiful. And wherever she landed there would be excitement and rushing about as she told her story. And men would flock to her. Young, handsome men!

She tottered back to the sling, sank gratefully into the comfort of it, closed her eyes, and waited.

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*The ship landed automatically, lowering itself to the land on a pillar of rushing flame, needing no help from its passenger. Then the flame died away—and the ship—and Ninon—rested, quietly, serenely, while the rocket tubes crackled and cooled. The people outside gathered at a safe distance from it, waiting until they could come closer and greet the brave passengers who had voyaged through space from no one knew where.*

*There was shouting and laughing and talking, and much speculation.*

*"The ship is from Maris, the red planet," someone said.*

*And another: "No, no! It is not of this system. See how the hull is pitted—it has traveled from afar."*

*An old man cried: "It is a demon ship. It has come to destroy us all."*

*A murmur went through the crowd, and some moved farther back for safety, watching with alert curiosity.*

*Then an engineer ventured close, and said, "The workmanship is similar to that in the space ship we are building, yet not the same. It is obviously not of our Aerth."*

*And a savant said, "Yes, not of this Aerth. But perhaps it is from a parallel time stream, where there is a system with planets and peoples like us."*

*Then a hatch opened in the towering flank of the ship, and a ramp slid forth and slanted to the ground. The mingled voices of the crowd attended it. The fearful ones backed farther away. Some stood their ground. And the braver ones moved closer.*

*But no one appeared in the open hatch; no one came down the ramp. At last the crowd surged forward again.*

*Among them were a youth and a girl who stood, hand in hand, at the foot of the ramp, gazing at it and the ship with shining eyes, then at each other.*

*She said, "I wonder, Robin, what it would be like to travel through far space on such a ship as that."*

*He squeezed her hand and said, "We'll find out, Nina. Space travel will come, in our time, they've always said—and there is the proof of it."*

*The girl rested her head against the young man's shoulder. "You'll be one of the first, won't you, Robin? And you'll take me with you?"*

*He slipped an arm around her. "Of course. You know, Nina, our scientists say that if one could travel faster than the speed of light one could live in reverse. So when we get old we'll go out in space, very, very fast, and we'll grow young again, together!"*

*Then a shout went up from the two men who had gone up the ramp into the ship to greet whoever was aboard. They came hurrying down, and Robin and Nina crowded forward to hear what they had to report.*

*They were puffing from the rush of their excitement. "There is no one alive on the ship," they cried. "Only an old, withered, white-haired lady, lying dead ... and alone. She must have fared long and far to have lived so long, to be so old in death. Space travel must be pleasant, indeed. It made her very happy, very, very happy—for there is a smile on her face."*

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