

PLANET STORIES

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS
— THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

20c

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VAMPIRE OF THE VOID

by NEIL R. JONES

THE MONSTER THAT THREATENED THE UNIVERSE

by R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

THE WAR-NYMPHS OF VENUS

A NOVEL OF EMBATTLED WORLDS
by RAY CUMMINGS



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THE
COSMIC DERELICT

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

First published in *Planet Stories*,
Spring 1941.

The *Voitrix* was doomed. A derelict caught in the grip of some strange power. Faster . . . Faster . . . flashing beyond unguessed-at Systems to cosmic annihilation

With puzzled gray eyes Captain Clement Sayers, pilot in chief of the Jove-Earth space liner *Voitrix*, gazed at the heavens through the main observation window in front of him.

The vessel was twelve days out from Jupiter, speeding swiftly now through the empty regions between Inner and Outer Circles—those whirling galaxies once known as the asteroidal belt—with Mars and Earth looming up in the far distance. Everything was going

perfectly; rockets were firing with rhythmic precision. Only in space itself was there something wrong.

Sayers had already received space radio warnings from the major planets to be on the look-out for an ether warp—and it loomed now, dead ahead, resembling a semi-luminescent line extending to infinity. The red light from Mars and Earth's moon was curiously deflected by it. Still further away Venus and Mercury were apparently several degrees out of their normal positions in the cosmos.

"Bit queer, isn't it, Clem?"

At the question Sayers jerked up his black head and found Steve Dawlish, his chief navigation engineer, by his side. His big red face was puzzled as he, too, gazed; the powerful fingers of his right hand beat a tattoo of uncertainty on top of the massive control panel.

"I don't like it!" he resumed, shaking his blond head. "I've seen ether fields and gravity vortices in my time, but never anything quite like that! Look at the extent of it!" His blue eyes widened as he stared at the incredible diagonal extension shooting into remoteness. "Right to infinity, I'd say!"

Clem did not answer immediately. With a frown on his square face he turned to the space receiver and contacted the Earth Void Bureau.

"*Voitrix* calling New York Bureau," he intoned mechanically. "Give latest space report."

A mechanical voice promptly responded.

"Gravity field fourteen million miles from Saturn—keep clear. Pursue Space Line Seven for Uranus contact. Notice to all spatial shipping on outer lines! Beware of warp, infinity extension, between Jupiter and Mars, crossing division between Inner and Outer Circles. Proceed with extreme caution. That is all."

Clem grimaced at his partner as he switched off.

"Not so hot!" he growled, considering. "It's perfectly clear that the astronomers back on Earth don't know anything about the nature of the warp. We don't know what we're heading through. . . . Guess the only thing to do is to go straight ahead."

His hands tightened resourcefully on the controls, his voice barked sharp orders to the rocket rooms below.

Dawlish looked serious. "Don't you think you're taking a chance, Clem?" he asked. "Suppose it's a magnetic blow-out like the one we nearly hit near Uranus a couple of months back? If it is and we go clean into it we'll take a short cut to hell!"

"And if it isn't and we turn around back to Jove until the warp expires we'll have the inquiry court to face," Clem growled back. "Don't forget we've got Chief Wernham aboard! No, our job is to land this coffee grinder in New York at sixteen-twelve, and we're going to do it, warp or no warp. Besides, I'm anxious to see how Bob Prescott has made out at the physics laboratory with his attempt to utterly annihilate matter. He'll be on the job right now. . . . Get busy, Steve. Let's go!"

Dawlish shrugged his huge shoulders and turned back to his navigational instruments. His red face was outthrust toward the viltax glass as he anxiously studied that curious diagonal light veerage sweeping ever closer.

"Keep her steady!" Clem murmured, lips tight.

"Steady she is!" The engineer's voice was tense.

In a long streak of rocket exhaust the immense silvered vessel shot into the midst of that unexplained phenomenon—and at that instant alarming things began to happen.

The entire liner, huge though it was, spun round wildly in the grip of an unknown power. Dawlish and Clem were both thrown violently to the floor and lay gasping huskily, clutching whatever solid projections they could reach.

Out of the corners of their eyes they beheld dial needles swinging and slewing crazily through half circles. There seemed to be no top nor bottom to the control room.

In other quarters of the liner there was supreme panic. Dinner in the great dining room was rudely interrupted by the tables being hurled sideways in a mad chaos of scalding soup, smashing dishes, overturned flower vases and slithering cutlery. Amid screams and shouts the orchestra suddenly stopped playing and catapulted backwards into their instruments; the pianist died instantly as his piano slammed inwards and crushed his ribs and heart. Stewards and waiters in room and corridors twirled round and fell with a clatter of their trays and glasses.

It was a perfect spacequake. From stem to stern the monster of the void was hammered and rocked by forces of enormous power; all the hideous uncertainty and terror of a major earth ripple was manifested for seven brief seconds. At the end of that time the rocking suddenly ceased and gave place to a strangling crushing pressure. Dead quietness was on the dining room. Only a groan or two broke the silence; the drops from an overturned mineral bottle echoed hollowly into a soup plate beneath. Here and there some struggled to rise, and failed. Others had already relapsed into unconsciousness from the terrific pressure on lungs and heart.

In the control room Clem and Dawlish were still conscious, but battling with the tremendous downpull.

"It's acceleration!" Dawlish wheezed out, sweat pouring down his strained face. "We're moving—moving like hell!"

Clem nodded a tousled head that felt enormously heavy. "I—I can't reach the gravitator switch!" he panted back, trying to gain it on hands and knees. "Too—too much weight!" He sagged flat, breathing like a grampus.

Dawlish looked at him and then set his teeth. Flattening his great hands on the metal floor he strained with all the power of his massive body. Muscles bulged through the tough whipcord of his tunic. Inch by inch, crawling on his stomach, he fought toward the control panel. Once he reached it he stopped for a moment, then drove his body upwards with every vestige of strength at his command. It was an effort of exquisite torture, set his craggy face in a mask of strain. Using his right arm as a support for his left he drove his fingers forward.

One inch—two inches. His fingers closed over the big handle of the artificial gravitation switch. With a sobbing gasp he fell downward and his weight pulled the blades out of contact.

Instantly the strain ceased; gravity suddenly returned to apparent earth normal.

Shaken and bruised the two staggered to their feet and mopped their streaming faces.

"That sure was tough!" Dawlish winced, rubbing his aching limbs.

Clem flurried around his instruments and observation windows in sudden apprehension. Finally he turned a startled face.

"We're clean off our course and heading with a constantly mounting velocity back toward the asteroidal belt!" he cried.

"So that's it!" Dawlish joined him in bewilderment, went on talking half to himself. "That accounts for gravity being normal without any artificial aid—our very velocity provides it. We were struggling against a doubled gravity before. . . . Say, do you think we might somehow be in that warp? Being pulled by something?"

“No question of it!”

Clem surveyed the fast receding inner system of planets, glanced upward toward the giant worlds ahead and the stars in the remoter deeps beyond—then with a sudden leap he jumped to the rocket room phone. Before he could speak, however, Rocket Chief Macintosh burst in, greasy and alarmed.

“Say, what d’you think you’re doin’?” his querulous Scots voice demanded. “When you start turnin’ around like that why don’t ye gie a thought to the boys below? I nearly fell on a tube and burned meself out. Just think what a loss that wuid ha’ been to the community!”

Clem studied him for a moment, absently regarded his little figure, immovable pipe, and leanly philosophical face—then he asked sharply:

“What’s going on down below, Mac? Anybody hurt?”

“No; but our tubes aren’t workin’ properly. We’re firin’ the forward tubes but the instruments tell us we’re movin’ faster than any ship ever moved before—and wi’ the brakes on at that!”

Macintosh stopped suddenly, his bright blue eyes perceiving the serious setness of his superiors’ faces. He stepped forward quickly and laid a grease-smear hand on Clem’s arm.

“Forgettin’ ye’re captain for a moment,” he apologized. “Tell me what’s wrong, Clem?”

Clem jerked his head toward the window and the Scotsman moved to it, to stand gazing in speechless astonishment. The whole map of infinity yawned ahead of the vessel—a colossal stardusted vastness. Already the ship had veered infinite miles away from the normal route, leaving Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune as mere dots in the blackness. Pluto was entirely out of sight.

Macintosh swallowed hard, then turned back to the baffled pair.

“Weel, wherever we’re goin’ we’re certainly doin’ it in a hurry,” was his dour comment. “From what I can see we must be headin’ toward movin’ at the speed o’ light—and in the wrong direction! All our control has gone to blazes! Well, I—” He hesitated and frowned; then saluted. “What are me orders, Captain?”

“I can’t give orders about something I don’t understand, Mac,” Clem returned worriedly. “Don’t you recognize a vast space warp when you see one?”

“Aye, I do that,” the Scot acknowledged. “But I’m also mindin’ the fact that we’ve got a mighty valuable lot o’ passengers aboard who are expectin’ to land in New York. And don’t you be forgettin’ Chief Wernham, either! He’ll expect you to do somethin’.”

Clem scowled. “I’d forgotten him. Guess I’d better go along and see what’s happening. Steve, do what you can with the controls. Mac, keep firing the forward tubes in an effort to slow us down. I’ll be back.”

He departed worriedly and hastened to the main dining room, pausing on the threshold at the scene of indescribable confusion that greeted him. In every direction men and women were flurrying anxiously, clothes torn and faces white, attending as fast as they could to those who had been injured. The dead already lay on righted tables, with tablecloths thrown perfunctorily over them.

Then, as he stood looking round, a hand dropped heavily on his shoulder. He swung round to meet the cold cynical eyes of Oscar Wernham, chief of the space ways—as massive and ruthlessly overbearing as ever. Nobody liked him. Even his best friends swore he smelt of the money he was worth.

“Well, it’s good of you to drop in, Captain Sayers,” he said, in a bitter voice. “The whole ship is struck by a cosmic earthquake and you drift in about ten minutes afterwards. What’s the meaning of it?” he snapped out abruptly.

“Guess you don’t want me in any case,” Clem answered coldly. “I’ve got my hands full figuring how to get clear of this mess. The passengers will have to look after themselves. I’ll make arrangements for the dead to be pushed through the airlocks.”

“I suppose I don’t need to remind you that we have many valuable passengers aboard?” Wernham sneered. “Passengers who have got to reach Earth at all costs. And I’m holding you responsible for their safety! You’ll have plenty to answer when we get back to earth, Captain Sayers!”

“*If* we get back to Earth,” Clem corrected grimly. “We’re in the midst of a space warp and that’s beyond my control. I’ll do all in my power.”

The big man nodded menacingly. “You’d better! In the meantime summon all the help you can get to aid these people.”

With that he turned aside, full of oily solicitude for the fat banker nearby who had suffered nothing worse than a cut eyebrow.

For a moment Clem stood glowering, then he turned and strode savagely back into the corridor, slammed down the switch of the alarm bell. It was purely a matter of routine; he knew quite well that its urgent clanging would fail to bring much help. Stewards and servants were far too busy in their own quarters attending to their own injuries to care particularly what happened to the passengers. At least it would perhaps bring the already overworked medical staff to perform further ministrations.

II

Doubly worried by the presence of Chief Wernham aboard the ship, Clem returned to the control room and tried hard to compose himself. Dawlish turned a glum face to him as he came in.

"Nothing we can do, Clem," he said seriously, tossing aside a pencil. "I've been figuring this thing out from the instruments and I never saw such a mess in all my life. Our speed is 180,000 miles a second, and still increasing. If we don't slow down we'll achieve the velocity of light and maybe cancel ourselves out—that is if the Fitzgerald Contraction holds good. Light velocity has never been achieved by a ship before. Rocket tubes are no good; old Mac is nearly going nuts below. Truth is, we're in a runaway space ship, held tight in the grip of an unknown power."

Clem's brow crinkled as he turned and stared through the rear observation window. The planets of the Outer Circle had entirely disappeared. Finally he turned sharply.

"Have you radioed to any of the planets, Steve?"

"No use," the engineer growled. "We're surrounded by some force or other that hetrodynes all radio waves, outwards and inwards. There's something else, too! Don't you notice a curious feeling of tensity about everything? As though we're under some enormous strain, not altogether accountable for by our prodigious speed?"

Clem considered for a while, then nodded slowly. Now he came to notice it he found that his head was curiously heavy and dull, almost identical with the sensation often experienced immediately prior to a thunderstorm. He had the oddest conviction that every part of his body, every molecule, was being subjected to a terrific stress—the plucking of indeterminate but none the less mighty forces.

"I can't make it out," he muttered, slumping down in the chair before the control panel. "Maybe it is only our speed that's doing it, after all."

He began to calculate with restless movements, only to arrive at the same conclusions as Dawlish. There was nothing to go on, nothing that made sense any longer. The ship was in an unknown space of its own, either being magnetized or hurled through the void, it was impossible to determine which. Only the speed needle seemed to be functioning properly and now it quivered closely against the 186,000 mps deadline.

The two men stared at it in fascination.

"Say, suppose we *do* cancel out—?" Dawlish questioned, dry lipped.

"Don't see how we can," Clem muttered back. "Surely we can't go faster than light?"

He paused, fists clenched, as the needle pressed tightly on the stop bar at the end of the scale. The velocity of light had been gained! The queer pulling at bodily molecules persisted; there seemed to come an enormous draining of resistance intensified by the terrific strain on the nerves.

Then suddenly, before the eyes of the two, the speed needle snapped off!

"We've—we've exceeded light!" Dawlish cried hoarsely. "It just can't be!"

He raced across to the window and stared fixedly onto the cosmos.

"If we have we ought to see light moving backwards toward us because we're moving faster than it is," he panted. "But there isn't anything like that visible! Only speed—terrific, incomprehensible speed. . . ."

Clem did not join him. He was seated now in deep thought, chin on hand.

“To exceed the velocity of light and retain the same size is impossible,” he said broodingly. “The only explanation of this occurrence does not fit in with speed, Steve—it fits in with size and space and their relation to time.”

“Meaning what?” Dawlish came forward again, his face puzzled.

Clem went on mechanically, “Meaning that our initial speed has not really increased in the least since we struck the space warp. We struck the space warp and were turned quickly round; from then on something else happened. An irresistible power, operating right through the warp, has caused the extension of our ship and everything in it right along the warp’s path. In other words, a power which we cannot explain as yet is forcing the atoms of our ship, our very bodies, outward with resistless force. We are being expanded to inconceivably larger dimensions and in doing so appear to achieve a speed far greater than that of light. That is only our relative outlook and not actual fact.”

“But how did it come about?” Dawlish demanded. “You’re not suggesting some cosmic accident caused it, are you?”

“Why not?” Clem’s voice was resigned and colorless. “We know from experience that the void teems with forces barely understood, with vortices and fields of power utterly incomprehensible. The ether is a criss-crossed mass of superimposed radiations, some known and other unknown. It’s as simple to imagine a strange power like the one gripping us as it is to imagine the track of a light wave.”

“But what do we *do*? Just let the ship go on moving, or expanding, or whatever it is?”

“There’s nothing else—” Clem began, then he twisted round sharply as the heavy form of Wernham entered the control room. The chief’s face was dark with anger.

“I thought I told you to get us back on a normal track?” he said harshly. “Don’t you realize that we’re heading for the Milky Way Galaxy? Get up out of that chair and do something!”

Clem scowlingly rose and listened dutifully as Wernham proceeded.

“I don’t exactly know, Captain Sayers, whether this has been planned deliberately or not, but I do know that you’ll face a court of justice when we return to Earth! Both you and Vice-Captain Dawlish will be placed under arrest upon our return. In the interval I will take over command.”

“You can’t,” Clem returned in a level voice. “By interplanetary law I remain captain of this ship until it collapses or returns to a known base. Can’t you recognize an Act of Cosmos when you see it? The very act you yourself passed to explain away unpreventable mishaps in space. Or did you do that to cover yourself on money losses when freight vessels go astray?”

Wernham scowled at the thrust, but he lost none of his boorish manner.

“Summon Macintosh!” he snapped. “I want to speak to him.”

Clem pressed the contact button. Within moments the Scot was in the room, pipe in hand, eyes curious. He stood regarding Wernham’s straddled, important form in sour suspicion.

“Ye want me, sir?”

“Yes, Macintosh, I do. You will take orders from me from now on; consider me as your captain. I want you to fire your rocket tubes against this force that is pulling us—fire every one of them! And keep it up until we break free!”

“An’ what do I do when we run out o’ fuel, sir?” the Scot asked.

Wernham snorted pompously. “You’re the rocket head man—that is for you to worry about. Only by firing all your rockets can you pull free of this space warp—”

"I ken one thing, sir—ye're not much o' a space navigator," the old man broke in quickly. "When ye're travelin' at a velocity weel above that o' light ye haven't a cat in hell's chance o' gettin' to one side. There isn't anythin' we can do but wait. Besides, I canna take orders from ye, sir. Captain Sayers is my superior."

"Damned insolence!" Wernham stormed, purpling. "You dare to tell me, your employer, what you are going to do? You'll hear about this later, Macintosh! Get below and fire those tubes!"

The rocketeer's blue eyes were bright with defiance.

"I'm not attemptin' somethin' I canna do!" he retorted stubbornly. "Ye'd best realize, Mr. Wernham, that this is one thing your power an' money canna change! We're in the clutch of an unknown power, an' out here in space we might as well say the good God himself is at the back of it!"

Wernham's eyes bulged with the anger that blazed through him. His huge frame quivered as he hovered on the verge of striking the cool Scotsman—then with a gust of impotent fury he stormed out of the control room.

Clem grinned faintly. "Thanks, Mac," he said briefly. "Good of you to stick by me."

Macintosh jammed his pipe back between his teeth. "I wouldn't tak orders from that gorilla for all the heather in Scootland," he answered emphatically. "I'll take 'em from you, and none else. . . . Now I'd better get below and keep the boys quiet. They're gettin' a bit restive. Any orders, sir?"

"None." Clem shook his head hopelessly. "We'll have to make out as best we can. I suppose there must be an end to our journey some place. Until then we'll stand by."

With the advance of the hours something of the earlier panic among the passengers abated a little. Instead they were seized with a profound wonderment at the thing that had happened. Nearly everybody who was able spent their time at the windows, staring out on the incomprehensible. Only those whom injury had forced to bed were uninterested. The ship's doctors and nurses found plenty to occupy their time.

Always present was that sensation of enormous strain and resistless expansion, and the more he pondered it the more certain Clem Sayers became in his belief that they were expanding at an inconceivable pace in relation to the known universe.

By now all traces of the known cosmos had disappeared. The ship was hurtling through the midst of bottomless emptiness, the Milky Way stretching ahead in an awe-inspiring haze of suns and blazing nebulae. Already they were beyond the line of Alpha Centauri, the nearest star.

"I think I'd better make it clear to the passengers," Clem said at last, turning from his study of infinity. "They might as well know that we can never return to Earth. Even if we stopped right now we haven't enough fuel to make the return trip."

He left the control room and headed for the main lounge. At his entry the groups of men and women around the broad windows turned to regard him. In the forefront Chief Wernham stood in glowering, accusing silence.

"So long as there has been a chance of escaping from this warp and returning us to within reasonable distance of our own system I have withheld the truth from you, ladies and gentlemen," Clem said quietly. "I can no longer do that. The *Voitrix* is a runaway ship in the grip of a magnetic power beyond all means of analysis—as yet. We are traveling infinitely faster than light; we are passing through spaces never traversed by mortal man. If this

continues we shall either pursue Einstein's curved space back to our starting point—which may Heaven grant!—or else we will burst right through our known universe into whatever lies beyond.”

“There's a *reason* for this mad flight!” Wernham declared doggedly. “What *is* dragging us? You call yourself a scientist and try and blame everything on a warp. If there is some other aspect of the matter tell it to us!”

Clem shrugged. “All right, since you ask for it. The warp represents, clearly enough, an oddity of spatial texture that should not be there. Outside of our universe, or else at its remotest extremity, there is something of a highly magnetic nature which is pulling the ship in an infinite extension along the path of the warp. Already we are inconceivably huge by comparison with the universe we are moving through. Because size is relative we cannot be aware of that inside this ship. The only evidence of it lies in the apparent enormous velocity with which we are streaking through infinity.”

“You—you don't mean we can never get back to Earth, Captain?” asked Madame Vera Lunn, the portly and bejeweled soprano.

Clem turned to her. “That's just what I do mean, madam.”

“But you've *got* to return!” she insisted earnestly. “I have a Milan engagement next month and I cannot possibly miss it.”

“Don't worry, lady, think what your audience is missing,” growled the bitter voice of a criminal, handcuffed to his guard.

“Silence!” barked Wernham authoritatively. “Have that man put out of here! Lock him in his cabin!”

“Just leave him right where he is,” Clem interrupted curtly. “I'm captain aboard this ship and only my orders will be regarded! Any other complaints?”

Vonlimer, the eminent financier, waddled forward with check book in one fat hand.

“How much will it take to get back?” he asked slyly. “I'm willing to pay any sum to—”

“Oh, go and sit down!” Clem snapped back furiously. “What the hell game do you think this is that money can square it out? We're all of us facing death! Death! And no money nor knowledge can get us out of it. It wouldn't do any of you much harm to try a little praying for once—like those two over there!”

He jerked his head toward a young man and woman whom he knew were a honeymoon couple. A tinge of regret touched him as he saw them kneeling together by the broad window; it seemed tough they should have come out to death so soon.

“Well, I guess it doesn't make much difference what I say now,” Clem resumed. “It's every man for himself, but I warn you that the slightest sign of disorder will be summarily dealt with. I'll have order on this ship right to the last. I look to you to help me.”

Heads nodded in agreement, and at that Clem turned and went slowly back to his own quarters.

To a space ship there is no back door nor lifeboat. Passengers and crew aboard the *Voitrix* began to realize that fact with a vivid, merciless intensity as hours slipped by into days and nights of Earth time.

Still flying onward at her incomputable pace the vessel went clean through the enormous masses of the Milky Way Galaxy, undeterred by the blazing suns that lay in her course so fast did she pass through them. Solid matter, when encountered, seemed to melt out of the way in the most baffling fashion.

Then onward again through stupendous island universes, past awe-inspiring sluices of energy and power. Long ago had the major stars of Antares, Arcturus, Capella and Sirius been left behind in the meaningless distance.

The majority of the passengers simply could not grasp what had happened, and thereby were more interested than afraid. Only the feeling of nervous and muscular tensity baffled them. Calmest of all, perhaps, with the isolated exceptions of Clem, Dawlish and Gervis, the saturnine earthly criminal, were Macintosh and his rocket crew. They passed the time in the ship's bowels, alternately singing space chancies or sleeping fitfully, but always alert in case the millionth chance happened and there might be a way of escape.

Equally vigilant though nearly exhausted from lack of sleep, were Clem and Dawlish. They kept constantly near their instruments and observation windows, trying vainly with limited mortal minds to grasp the real meaning of infinity. The immensity of everything staggered their reasoning powers; the eternal procession of blazing stars, chaotic boilings of energy, hurtling shafts of light, were things beyond them. They could only guess at the ultimate incredible truth—that they were going to break through the known universe into a supra-state beyond.

When that would happen they could not imagine, though if distance covered was any guide it promised to be soon. Already every known galaxy and system was out of sight behind. Their speed—if such it was—had become so terrific that even the furthest scattered stars moved at an incredible pace past them. But space was becoming emptier, changing into a vast sable unknown that had neither light nor life. It loomed, an eternal vault of death.

Clem found himself wondering, with bitter reminiscence, how Bob Prescott's matter annihilation experiment had worked out. Strange thought, right out here in space. He silently regretted that he would never know now if the destruction of matter had really taken place. In his own mind he could not see such a thing occurring; his beliefs clung to the rigid scientific principle that the total destruction of the minutest scrap of matter would involve the whole collapse of the universe.

The grim knowledge that inevitable death lay ahead brought the more devout of the ship's passengers to their knees. Through the chronometrical days they had been studying this mad flight, sleeping only at intervals through sheer exhaustion and strain, then resuming their eternal watch. Now they prayed or were silent, according to their temperaments. Many of them kneeled in groups before the broad windows, realizing for the first time in their lives the terrible mightiness, the supernal loneliness, of the cosmos.

The honeymooners were clasped in each other's arms; the man was murmuring faint words of encouragement in the tearful girl's ear. Gervis the criminal was seated in grim silence, brutally unafraid of the Ultimate—but beside him his guard was limp in despair.

At the opposite end of the great room Madame Vera Lunn was lustily singing "Abide With Me." Her technique was perfect, her bosom swelled in powerful rhythms, but to the jittery people around her she was a sublime irritant. Vonlimer sat crouched on the floor, regarding her with pale frightened eyes, his teeth viciously biting his nails.

Perhaps the strongest of all was Chief Wernham. He stood a little apart from the others in arrogant silence, legs wide spread, hands locked behind him, staring with flinty gray eyes on the sweeping formless dark.

Down in the rocket rooms the rocketeers were watching too through their tiny windows. Macintosh talked slowly, unlighted pipe between his teeth, but one ear was cocked for the slightest vestige of a signal from the earnestly watching controllers in the room above.

"It sure is pretty close to the end of the road all right," Clem breathed, as he stared through the window with Dawlish at his side. "We surely can't go much further because—"

His sentence was never finished. It broke off as he became amazedly aware of the blackness ceasing to have extension. Instead it seemed to rush forward in a sudden vast blanket of dark, only to be split at the self-same second by a blinding, tearing incandescence of light.

Clem went staggering backwards, Dawlish with him. Unable to save themselves they collided with the opposite wall.

The liner quivered and then rocked from end to end. A repetition of the sliding upheavals of the first contact with the warp took place, and for some there was no awakening from the darkness into which they were flung. . . .

Clem returned to his senses with the awareness of stinging pains in his head, of tart restorative burning down his throat. Then the powerful hands of Dawlish heaved him to his feet.

"O. K.?" The big engineer's face was concerned.

Clem nodded uncertainly. "Yes—yes, I'm all right—but what happened?"

"You hit your head on the control panel and got laid out. I've not the vaguest idea where we are but we've certainly stopped moving. We seem to be on a world of sorts. . . ."

His head clearing a little Clem moved to the window and gazed out. His brow knitted at the peculiar thing he saw—an impression of vast pillars, amazingly misty in consistency. At their furthest and almost hidden heights were monstrous objects that might conceivably have passed for electromagnets of colossal dimensions. Matched to all this was a hazy suggestion of machines, again patterned on a scale so enormous that they staggered the imagination—and back of it all, drifting and moving, were the Shapes, unformed misty things resembling white curtains drifting to and fro.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Dawlish asked, puzzling.

Clem hesitated for a moment, then he moved to his gages, regarded them in increasing surprise.

"Temperature 80°, humidity earth normal, gravity earth normal, atmosphere earth normal. . . . Say, this planet's mighty accommodating, if planet it is. Exactly the same readings as Earth itself! I'd better tell the passengers; tell Mac and his men to come up and join us."

Clem left the control room and spent some fifteen minutes sorting out a party of uninjured passengers, detailing others off to look after those who had been hurt. Rather to his irritation Chief Wernham was unhurt, but a trifle less self-assured. Several of the things he had seen had done something to make him realize his actual littleness.

Gervis the criminal was unshackled from his dead guard and added to the party; so were the honeymooners. Madam Vera Lunn had sung her last song; Vonlimer meditated upon his last cent. Both were dead.

"Now get this," said Clem grimly, when they were all congregated round the central airlock and each holding a flame gun. "We've got to keep together and watch our step. We're on a world of sorts, and from our journey it looks as though it is in a universe far beyond our own. We don't know what we're facing or what may happen. You'll all take orders from me. Now let's go. Open her up!"

McIntosh moved forward with the brawny square-faced rocketeers and twisted the massive airlock screws. In two minutes the great circle was opened and a warm soft air came

surging into the stuffy vessel. For a moment or two the party stood looking dubiously out onto a flat plain, shining brightly with almost metallic hue. . . . The misty pillars and machinery were still around; the Shapes still hovered enigmatically in the background.

“Well, are we going to stand here all day?” demanded Wernham suddenly, and at that Clem stepped forward and stood looking around him.

He said nothing to the others, but he could have sworn that in following one of the hazy Shapes to its ultimate height he could make out the details of a colossal face looking down at him! The effect was unnervingly queer.

“By the sweet breath o’ Scootland, where are we?” whispered Macintosh, biting his pipe. “It’s the sort o’ thing I never hoped ta see outside of a wee drap! D’ye ken those foggy looking machines there? They’re—”

He broke off and the entire party fell backwards slightly as their ears were suddenly hammered by a terrific, beating voice. Words rolled and growled at them—incredibly enough, in English!

“Friends, we owe you an apology!” they boomed. “If you can understand our language, hear what we have to say. Our magnets, in annihilating and tearing apart a block of copper must have caught your space vessel and torn it out of the microcosm in which your world and universe formerly existed. Only when your ship, elongated beyond all measure by the magnetic force we applied, became visible to us did we realize that life might exist in the molecules of the copper block. From our point of view the effort at utterly destroying a portion of matter has been successful; but unfortunate from your angle. You appreciate, of course, that your journey through your spatial realm, your bursting through into this other realm beyond, was all accomplished in what to us was a split second? To make it clearer you may know, if you are scientists, that in a single explosion it is conceivable that upon the electrons *within* the explosion there might exist races who are born, mature and die in that incredibly short space of time.”

There was a strange expression on Clem’s face as, raising his voice, he shouted back, “We are scientists, and we understand all that. But who are you? Where are you exactly?”

“All around you, so vast that we transcend all known dimensions of size so far as you understand. Much though your ship has enlarged—though it is infinitely vaster than your whole universe—you are still far less than us in dimensions. About you you behold our annihilative and magnetic machinery, so vague to you because of your smallness; you are nearly able to see the interstices between the molecules that make up the machines. Every tremor of the air causes light defraction. That is why the whole outlook is so uncertain to you.”

“What planet is this?” demanded Wernham commandingly, chin outthrust.

There was a brief silence, then the astounding answer came back.

“This is the planet Earth!”

IV

It took the party a long time to realize the profound and bewildering significance of that reply. They looked at each other, all of them momentarily reduced to a common level of bafflement. . . . Only in the eyes of Clem did there seem to be a faint gleam of understanding.

“If this is Earth,” he shouted, “it should be possible for you to increase our size by the use of the molecular machine. Can you do that?”

“If you wish it, certainly. One moment.”

There was a rustling movement amidst the Shapes. Wernham stepped forward aggressively.

“Look here, Sayers, what are you planning to do?” he demanded. “What kind of a cosmic game is this?”

“Did you hear the being say that this is Earth?”

“Certainly I did, but it is an obvious impossibility. Earth is so far away it staggers the imagination to remember it.”

“Nevertheless, this is still the Earth!” Clem returned steadily. “You wanted to get back there—well, you’ve done it. . . .”

The Chief relapsed into puzzled silence. Clem too became thoughtful. A strange theory was turning over in his mind; the first dim conceptions of what the strange warp in space had really meant. Then he looked up sharply as he suddenly found himself enveloped in a heatless beam of pure violet color. Strain seized his limbs, and with it a sensation of gripping cramp. He beheld the others likewise affected, if their strained faces were any guide.

Through his half-closed eyes he watched the inconceivable giantism of the machines and pillars about him begin to decrease. They lost their queer tenuity and became solid. By slow degrees the vast remoteness of everything came into measurable distance. . . . And to Clem and Dawlish the transition from small to large meant something else—an infinite amazement at actually recognizing every detail of the place they had merged into. It was the major New York physics laboratory.

The empty metallic plain of the landscape they had formerly viewed resolved itself now into the metal disk beneath the influence of the now silent electromagnets and blast-disintegrators. The ship, far below, was now no larger than a silver pencil.

Abruptly the expansion ceased; the violet beam from the Enlarger expired. With puzzled eyes the party stood looking at an equally puzzled group of white garbed scientists, who formerly had been the moving Shapes. The foremost of them, tall and blond, Clem and Dawlish instantly recognized.

“Bob Prescott!” Clem cried eagerly, and moved forward from the midst of the machinery to shake him by the hands.

“Clem Sayers, as I live and breathe!” Prescott exclaimed in bewilderment; then he twirled to survey the rest of the party. “But—but how in thunderation did this come about?” he asked blankly. “Last I heard of you you’d been caught in an ether warp between Jupiter and Earth and had entirely disappeared. How the devil did you ever come to emerge out of a microcosm? Out of the copper block we’ve just annihilated?”

“That’s what I want to know!” exclaimed Wernham testily. “I was given to understand that we’d never return to Earth—”

“But we have,” Clem interrupted him calmly. “There’s nothing more to worry over on that score. I’ve brought you back home, so maybe you don’t think me such a rotten Captain now?”

“More like a wizard, I’d say,” murmured McIntosh in a puzzled voice.

The big man shrugged rather reluctantly. “Well,” he said grudgingly, “I have to admit that you’ve brought us back—though *how* I simply can’t imagine. You’ll still attend a court of inquiry, Captain Sayers, to explain about the deaths and injuries aboard.” For a moment he softened slightly; relief was a great soother. “Maybe I was a bit hasty,” he went on, coughing primly. “I withdraw my earlier remarks. . . . Prescott, I take it that you can get the other people out of that pencil of a ship?”

The scientist glanced at it. “I guess so, sir—yes. We’ll get the people out and enlarge them. Take about thirty minutes.”

“Very good. You, Captain Sayers, will see that the people are safely conducted to their destinations and will make arrangements for ambulances. Then report to me at headquarters. I’ll take these others with me. . . . Come!”

Wernham turned and led the way out of the laboratory, followed by the honeymooners and Gervis, in the iron grip of the rocket men. Only when the door had closed did Clem, Dawlish and Macintosh look at each other quickly, then back to the still puzzled Prescott.

“Suppose you stop tellin’ us the fairy tales and come doon to airth?” the Scot suggested. “Ye’re no foolin’ an old rocket man with your story. We *did* come out of a microcosm into a macrocosm, didn’t we?”

Clem nodded seriously. “Yes, Mac, we did—and by so doing we proved a law of space, time and size that few have suspected before. Truth to tell we’ve never been on *this* Earth before and we’ve never met *this* Bob Prescott, any more than he’s met us. Am I right?”

The scientist and his assistants nodded slowly.

“There’s an interrelated state of micro and macrocosms, I think,” Prescott said thoughtfully. “Another Clem Sayers and Dawlish did get caught in an ether warp before they reached Mars; and they utterly disappeared—but it couldn’t have been you because you’ve come out of an infinite small—”

“Look here, will one of you guys make up your mind and tell a poor benighted navigator what it’s all about?” demanded Dawlish. “How *did* we get here?”

“I’ll tell you,” Clem smiled. “Listen carefully. . . .”

“Our experience has shown us that throughout space, from the smallest to the largest, there is an identical uniformity of time, matter, creation, maturity and death. An electron, as we know from our own studies, operates in a manner incomprehensible to us. It is a probability, embracing multiple dimensions and multiple spaces. Part of its nature we understand in that it reflects to us the visible forms of matter, such as human beings and cabbages. But there are other parts of its nature which we do *not* understand—its resolution into other forms which, by reason of dimensional eccentricity, are hidden from us. For instance, every electron requires a three dimensional space to itself; two require six, three nine, and so on, veering into multiple dimensions we cannot possibly imagine.

“Now, assuming the time factor to be exactly identical for each of those different states, and assuming also that *unseen* dimensional resolutions of the electron pattern themselves into matter identical with what *is* seen, what do we get?”

“I’ll buy it,” said Dawlish. “What?”

“Reproduction?” suggested Macintosh shrewdly; and Clem nodded.

“Right you are, Mac! Reproduction! In other words, every atom and molecule repatterns within itself exactly what is inside it again, and so on down and down, beyond electrons inside electrons, into the very ultimate small of all matter.”

“You mean,” said Prescott slowly, “that a tremendous process of repetition in every atom, in every universe, in every microcosm, in every macrocosm, takes place at exactly the same time? Each an identical mirroring of the other?”

“You have it,” Clem agreed. “In another way it explains the indestructibility of matter. Destroy one fragment of any universe—utterly and completely annihilate it—and all creation would fall in pieces. Imagine for a moment a prismatic mirror with say, twenty facets. Put a hand in front of one and you see twenty reproductions of that hand all doing the same thing at the same instant of time. So it is, we have proved, with the universe. It never began and never ended because it is all one, each atom identical with the microcosm actions it encloses; each macrocosm identical with the atom *it* encloses. . . .

“To come to our personal experience. Back on our own world one Bob Prescott experimented with the annihilation of copper. At the same time an ether warp arrived. When Prescott made his experiment every Prescott in every other universe, great and small, did likewise. Likewise in every other universe another Clem and Dawlish inside their space liner were caught in a warp and drawn by the terrific power of annihilating magnets out of their own universe into one inconceivably greater. You see? We came out of the smaller. On my own world another one has come out of a realm still smaller—and so on right down the scale. Likewise on the upper scale. Outside of this universe another Clem, Dawlish, and all the crowd, has emerged in another universe beyond this one—is doing now exactly what I’m doing. There are myriads of Clems, Dawlishes, Macintoshes, ships *etcetera*, all doing the same thing at the same time. They *have* to do, otherwise our emergence from a primal atom, when you successfully destroyed matter, would have smashed apart the entire structure of creation.”

“*Now* I get it!” breathed Dawlish. “Time is uniform, and so is space, but electrons are infini-dimensional and thereby reproductive. The total destruction of matter *did* take place, but it only resulted in every known universe shuffling slightly and regaining balance. We provided it.”

“Just that,” Clem confirmed. “Last but not least—we happened to arrive on Earth because that was where the magnets were at work. The warp was the magnetism operating through the copper, of course. . . . Now I ask you, why should I have explained all that to Wernham?”

“Why indeed!” laughed Prescott. “So far as I’m concerned he’s the same Wernham and you’re the same Clem. . . . Which reminds me I’d better be getting the people out of that ship. . . .”

He broke off in surprise and turned with the others as Macintosh took his pipe out of his mouth and burst into a roar of laughter.

“What’s up, Mac?” Clem questioned curtly.

“Plenty!” the rocket man wheezed. “I just happened to think! Can you realize there’s myriads of men like me scattered through all the universe and all time! Aye, but I thought one was enough—and that too much!”

He doubled up again; but the others did not laugh. They wouldn’t be happy without the old Scot no matter how many reproductions he possessed.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed. Chapter II is followed by IV and has not been fixed.

[The end of *The Cosmic Derelict* by John Russell Fearn]