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Time's Vortex

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**ARTHUR
LEO
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ATION

THE IMMORTALITY SEEKERS

An Interplanetary Novelette

By **JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.**

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WHEN
the
EARTH
LIVED

By
HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "Four Frightful Men," "Terror in the Night," etc.

A Super-Universe Unleashes
Forces that Create New,
Sentient Life!

When Jim Marden discovered that the Universe had apparently gone insane, he was already on his way to the mountain home of Dr. Leon Kent, his uncle and sole living relative. An urgent, cryptic telegram from Kent had caused Marden hurriedly to pack a bag, throw it in the back of his roadster, and start the long drive to Coon Mountain, where his uncle had his home and laboratory. Snatching a hasty meal at a roadside stand, he glanced over a newspaper and saw the first warning of the disaster that was to become cosmic in its scope.

If Marden hadn't been somewhat of a scientist, in his amateur way, he would scarcely have realized the tremendous potentialities behind the news item on Page 6. It was brief enough, stating only that according to a dispatch received from the Mount Wilson observatory, N.G.C. 385, a nebula in the Pegasus cluster, had stopped its race away from the earth at a velocity of 2,400 miles per second, and was darting with even greater speed at right angles to its former course.

The layman might have passed over the item unperturbed, but Marden knew that when a thing like that can happen, science loses its sanity and becomes an avocation for madmen.

A girl sitting near him at the counter called to the waiter. She held up a spoon—or what must have been one once. Now it was only an oddly malformed bit of metal.

“What do you call this?” she asked.

The waiter, apologizing, gave her another spoon. In a moment Marden had forgotten the incident. Obviously it was ridiculous to connect a suddenly insane nebula with the curious malformation of an ordinary spoon. Yet the two incidents were related, Marden was later to realize—and so, likewise, was the remarkable incident of the coffee urn.

Marden wasn't looking at the big, silvery urn at the time, and his first realization of anything wrong was a sudden hiss and a splash from beyond the counter, and an astonished cry from the waiter. He glanced up, and saw a deluge of brown liquid pouring from the bottom of the urn. In a moment the floor within the U-shaped counter was flooded. The waiter bent to turn off the gas, and suddenly froze, his bulging eyes staring up at the bottom of the urn.

“Well, I'll be—” he exclaimed. “I never seen a thing like this before.”

“What?” asked the girl who had wanted another spoon. Marden noticed that she was rather lovely, with greenish, glowing eyes, and a somewhat pert nose. A young man sitting beside her, blond, handsome, of the matinee idol type, added: “The place'll be falling apart next, Lorna.”

The waiter turned a puzzled face to Marden.

“Funny,” he said. “Looks like the metal had simply curled back out of the way of the flame. There's a ring of it—not melted, but curled back—all around the hole in the bottom.”

“Maybe it didn't like the fire,” the blond youth said, with unintentional accuracy. The waiter shot him an unpleasant glance.

The girl got off the stool, and her companion threw a coin on the counter.

“When does the bus leave?” he asked.

A grin appeared on the waiter's face.

“It's left,” he said with relish. “Won't be none till tomorrow now.”

“But we've got to get to Carr City,” the boy exclaimed. “There's no place to stay here, even if—”

Marden said the obvious thing.

“I'm going almost to Carr City. I'd be very glad to give you a lift.”

“Thanks,” the boy accepted eagerly. The girl hesitated, but nodded at last. Marden got off the stool, spinning a half dollar on the counter, and stumbled, nearly falling.

“That’s funny,” he commented, grinning wryly. “Felt like the floor gave way beneath me.” Indeed, there had been an odd sensation of—*life*—in the wooden floor, almost as though it had actually moved beneath his feet. He glanced down, noting that the cracks in the wooden planks seemed awry, as though warped and twisted. They seemed to move as he watched, writhing back to their original position. Marden blinked. An optical illusion, he concluded.

Nearly two hours later the roadster was laboring up the slope of Coon Mountain. Half a mile ahead, across a canyon, Marden could see the bus his guests had missed. His eyes kept returning to it, despite the dangerous curves of the mountain road. There seemed something distinctly unusual about its method of progress. It seemed to move forward jerkily, apparently leaping a few feet occasionally into the air; at any rate, Marden was sure that sometimes he could see the bus wheels clear of the road.

He wondered what was the matter with him. Perhaps he was becoming ill, even the little roadster seemed difficult to handle today. It did not respond readily to his hand on the steering wheel, and he had a curious and inexplicable feeling of uneasiness. For some unknown reason, he felt glad that he was not in a closed car.

His guests, apparently, noticed nothing unusual. The boy—Bob Harrison—had driven the girl, Lorna Newton, to Los Angeles to attend a football game, and on the way home his car had broken down.

“The garage was swamped,” Harrison told Marden. “An epidemic of accidents, it seemed. Lorna has to get back to work by tomorrow morning, and I’ve got to get back to the university.”

“Well,” Marden said. “I’ll catch up with the bus and put you on it. I was supposed to turn off here—” He gestured toward a half-hidden road that branched off just ahead among the pines. “But I can come back to it. I’ll be up with the bus in a few minutes.”

Luckily, he wasn’t. The catastrophe happened just as Marden was at the hairpin turn of a narrow canyon. A hundred yards ahead he saw the bus, a double-decker affair of blue paint and chromium. Abruptly the world went crazy.

The road just ahead seemed to buckle, to leap up at an impossibly steep angle, so that the bus began to slide back. Automatically Marden jammed on the brake, sat staring.

“Earthquake!” Harrison gasped.

But it wasn’t. The asphalt road fell away from beneath the bus, and the vehicle smashed down with a metallic crash. The tires blew out with a deafening report. From within the bus came screams—agonized, terrified.

For the bus was—collapsing! It was folding inward upon itself, as though it were being crushed in the grip of some giant hand. Glass shattered. The windows, instead of squares, became oblongs—became mere slits until they disappeared as the metal fused.

“Good Lord!” whispered Marden. “Look at the road!”

Beneath the bus the asphalt was curling up, and the vehicle was sinking slowly from sight. It was as though the road had suddenly turned into a sea of sucking mud, dragging the bus inexorably down. A pandemonium of shrieks came to Marden’s ears. He saw a squat, bulky figure writhing into view from a window that narrowed as he watched.

The man squirmed frantically for a moment; then he was free, and the metal coalesced behind him. He came racing toward the roadster, his mouth open in a frenzied oval of terror.

The bus was now nothing but a long ovoid of smooth, glistening metal. It shrank, became a sphere a fifth of its former bulk. The screams had stopped.

It sank from view. The asphalt engulfed it.

The squat man was plunging desperately down a road that swayed and buckled beneath him. Abruptly Marden sent the roadster rocketing up the slope at the side of the road, felt solid earth giving like sand beneath the car. He raced the motor and managed to pull free, got the roadster faced in the other direction. The squat man came abreast of the car, leaped to the running-board as Marden beckoned. A grinding unearthly roar was coming from the ground beneath them.

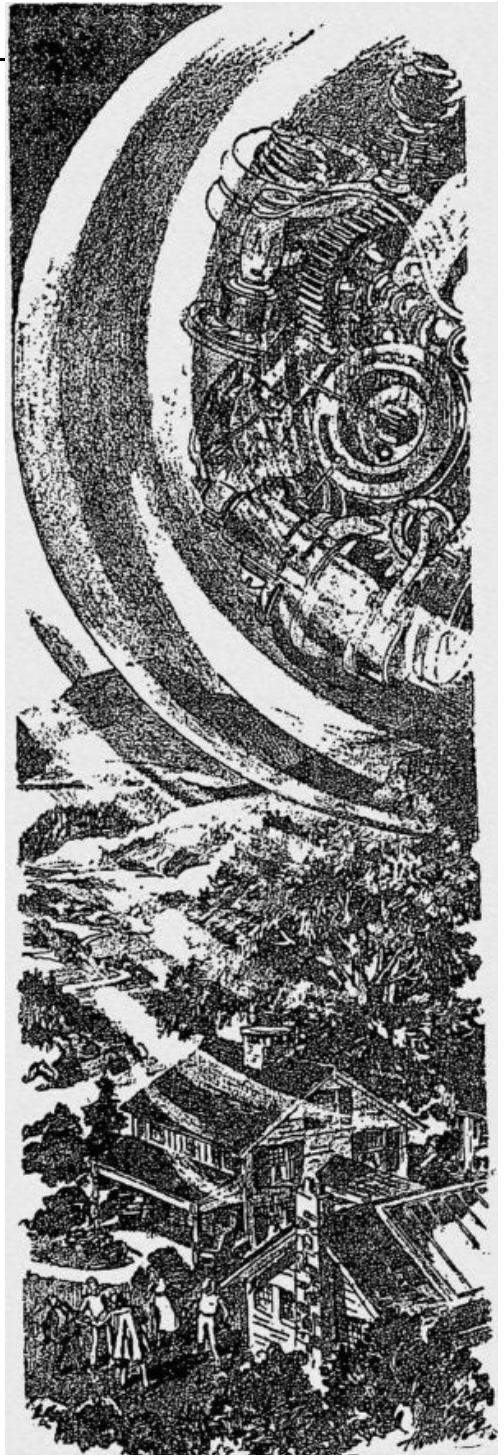
Marden jammed his foot down on the accelerator. He felt the little roadster sway dizzily, tilting dangerously toward the precipice on the left. But the car's speed carried it safely down the road. He caught a glimpse of Lorna's face, strained and white.

The squat man shouted something, scrambled frantically for footing. He managed to pull himself up on the body of the roadster, opened the rumble seat, and tumbled in. Glancing down, Marden realized that the running-board had vanished. There was a thin strip of oddly blackened rubber running along the side of the car where it had been.

Still the road swayed beneath them. Marden wrenched at the steering wheel, sent the car racing up the road that led to his uncle's home. They topped the crest of a hill, and a little valley came into view, in which a ramshackle frame house was set. There was an odd flickering in the air about the house.

"The car's falling apart!" Harrison shouted above the grinding uproar that thundered from the earth. The door of the car at Harrison's side was gone; white-faced, he clung to the windshield, and it seemed to melt and disappear as he clutched it. A blast of wind hit Marden's face.

The steering wheel came off in his hand.



Luckily, the road was straight. He saw a tall figure come running from the frame house, pause for a moment, and then retreat quickly. The inexplicable flickering in the air about the building faded, was gone. Marden pressed the brake and eased the car to a stop. It skidded, turned half around and paused in the middle of a garden.

Above the rumbling of the earth a high-pitched whine sounded, grew louder. The flickering in the air began again; but now it was beyond the roadster and its shaken occupants. It was as though an invisible wall of strange force enclosed the house, guarded it.

Shakily Marden got out of the car, helped Lorna to alight. Harrison and the squat man hastily followed his example. They looked at each other silently. There didn't seem to be much to say.

Someone came out of the house, a gaunt, slender man, with ascetically handsome features. His age was betrayed only by the streaks of white at his temples.

"Uncle Leon!" Marden said, and paused lamely. "I—we—well, I got here!"

"So I see," Dr. Kent said drily. "Come in the house, all of you, and have a drink. You need it."

Dr. Kent explained as he worked. He talked to them while peering into a microscope and making hasty calculations on sheets of paper that littered the laboratory table. The others sat around uneasily, watching him. Harrison and Lorna sat close together on a bench, and Marden leaned against the wall, biting nervously at the bit of his pipe. The squat man was Stan Burford, a promoter on a vacation. He sat rigidly on the edge of a chair, his unintelligent face bearing a look of stupid fear. Just what he promoted he never made quite clear. Marden decided that the man was a petty gambler.

Dr. Kent, still calculating busily, turned the screw of the microscope.

"I did not think it would come so quickly," he said. "I believe this is the only place on Earth where we are reasonably safe. The flickering in the air you noticed, Jim"—Marden had already mentioned this—"was due to a death ray I've adapted. It surrounds us, like a hollow globe of force. Or, rather, of annihilation. If I hadn't seen you coming, and turned it off temporarily, you'd have been killed."

Lorna repressed a shudder.

"I didn't know death rays existed," she said.

The doctor stared at her.

"My dear girl, death rays are no longer pseudo-science—they're cold fact, as you'd know if you read the scientific journals—even the newspapers. I've simply adapted the ray to my own uses. It acts as a barrier to—to—" He hesitated.

"I think I have an idea of what's wrong," Marden said. "That nebula in Pegasus gave me the clue. It's something—cosmic—isn't it?"

"Yes. An experiment, Jim—a cosmic experiment, in which we are the subjects—the guinea pigs. You know the atomic theory, of course?"

"That this Universe is merely an atom in a larger Universe, and so on, to infinity?" Marden asked. The doctor nodded.

"That's right. An old idea, of course. It's served as the basis for innumerable pseudo-scientific stories, and, actually, it's generally taken for granted by the world of science. But—you know what I've been working on for years, Jim, don't you?"

"Rays," Marden said. "Yes. Especially the cosmic ray. You don't mean—"

"Exactly. The cosmic ray put me on the track of the truth—a truth so unbelievable, so strange, that I dared not announce my discovery. I'd have been laughed at, and worse. Perhaps put in an asylum. And I needed my freedom to complete my work. Whether it will do any good now—

"The closest guess scientists have made as to the nature of the cosmic ray," Kent went on, "is—life. And that's just what it is. For ages men have tried to create artificial life in the laboratory. All the while, they have neglected the most important factor—the cosmic ray itself, which is the source of life. All through this universe the ray has spread. And very slowly, very gradually, it has increased in power."

"But the Arrhenius theory—" Marden began.

Kent interrupted him.

"It doesn't conflict. Life spores can float from world to world—yes. Nevertheless, in the beginning, life was generated by the action of the cosmic ray. No one has guessed its source. That's because it comes from *beyond* the universe—from the super-world in which we are merely an atom.

"I can best make you understand by choosing familiar examples. Let us suppose that a scientist has discovered a ray which creates life. He is experimenting with the atom. He turns this ray upon an atom—an extremely complex one—under his microscope. He creates life.

"But he is not content. He wishes to experiment further. He increases the power of the ray. And life—"

Marden gasped. "You mean that in this super-universe—but it's impossible!"

"Not at all! For that's exactly what has happened. In the super-universe, the cosmic ray has been increased in power by the Scientist—Scientists, rather—who are experimenting with the atom in which our world exists. Soon I shall show you how I know this, Jim. Do you know what life is?"

"I know that," the blond Harrison said. "Life is adaptability and growth."

Dr. Kent snorted. "These college students! Those are merely the attributes of life. A living organism can adapt itself to its surroundings—and it can grow. But what is life itself?"

"No one knows that," said Marden.

"Quite right. And the common error of the world of science is that it confines life to organic matter. Rocks, they say, cannot live. Metal cannot live. Atoms cannot live. Yet you saw those things alive this morning!"

"What?" Marden frankly stared. For a moment he had a fleeting suspicion that his uncle had gone insane. "It's impossible!"

"Don't keep saying that! Ordinarily, yes. The power of the cosmic ray—the *life ray*—at first gave life to only those elements which could readily acquire it—organic entities, protoplasm, evolving to man. Now that the cosmic ray is stepped-up, the mysterious life force is spreading to all things throughout the Universe. Adaptability—and growth!"

"The coffee spoon—" Lorna whispered.

They had told Kent of the incident in the roadside restaurant.

"Yes," he affirmed, nodding. "The heat of the coffee made it coalesce into a form in which it would feel less warmth than in its original shape. And the coffee boiler—the metal *did* curl out of the way of the flame. We can't foresee what may occur—inorganic life is so alien to

ours. The weight of the bus perhaps caused the catastrophe on the road. The earth itself is growing and adapting itself. It is becoming alive.”

“He’s crazy,” the stocky Burford whispered to Harrison. But the college boy shook his head impatiently, waiting for Dr. Kent to continue.

“The—infection—is spreading slowly, of course. As yet Earth feels only the first birth pangs. Later only the Lord knows what will happen. In this one spot, protected from the accelerated cosmic ray, are we temporarily safe. But—” He shrugged.

“Somehow I can’t really believe it,” Marden said slowly. “It seems too—incredible. I’ve always been taught that life is limited to organic matter.”

“How can anyone know that, when no one knows what life is? Look here, Jim—and the rest of you.”

Dr. Kent arose, and went to a table nearby on which a bulky, unfamiliar apparatus rested. A metallic screen, about two feet square, surmounted the strange machine. Kent pressed a button. Flashing light played over the screen.

“I’ll show you the super-universe,” he said. “I stumbled on this during my experiments. It is a rather simple principle; I utilize the cosmic ray itself as a carrier to a visual beam, sent in the opposite direction. Outward. The peculiar properties of the cosmic ray make this possible. Without it, naturally it would not work.”

The flickering lights faded from the screen. A scene materialized into view, dim, greyish. Involuntarily Lorna cried out, clapped her hands to her eyes. A sharp twinge darted through Marden’s head as his eyes tried to follow impossible curves and angles. Unfamiliar, alien objects were visible—things that seemed to be constructed according to a fantastic, non-Euclidean geometry.

Strange curves twisted and writhed into impossible angles. Only in the center of the screen was the image clearly defined. Yet Marden could not understand what he saw.

A machine—yes. That he knew. But it was not akin to any machine he had ever seen. It was built of crystal, planes and spheres impinging, somehow, upon a single point where a spot of light glowed vividly—blazing light, blinding and unearthly.

“The origin of the cosmic ray,” Kent whispered, “is in that super-universe. You are looking at our own cosmos from—Outside!”

Something swam into focus—a slender, rodlike object, glowing with emerald brilliance. It hovered over the spot of light and retreated.

“I think—I am not sure—I think that is one of the Scientists,” Kent said under his breath. “Watching the experiment that means destruction to mankind.”

“Incredible!” Harrison exclaimed. Burford, the promoter, was muttering something inaudibly.

“It is immaterial to me whether you believe or not,” Kent said coldly. “I—know. And that is enough.”

“But what can we do?” Marden asked. “This means destruction. There’s no way—”

“There is a way,” Kent told him. “It’s a way which I’ve been planning ever since I got on the track of this, years ago. If that super-microscope can be destroyed, shattered—”

Involuntarily Marden laughed, a short, bitter bark. His uncle raised his eyebrows.

“Still skeptical, eh? Let’s return to our original comparison—our scientist, experimenting with an atom. Just suppose that some explosive compound far more destructive than dynamite were introduced under the lens of the microscope—and exploded.”

“Wouldn’t it wreck the atom?” Harrison asked. The doctor glared at him.

Marden interrupted. “No,” he said. “It’d probably blow up the microscope and the laboratory—but the atom wouldn’t be hurt, naturally. Far too small.”

“Exactly,” the doctor affirmed. “Well, that’s my plan. That’s what I’ve been working on for years. And it’s almost completed. I’m going to send a sphere packed with that new explosive, thernolyn, into that super-universe—and make it wreck the microscope and the machine that generates the cosmic ray!”

Stunned by the magnitude of Kent’s plan, Marden could only stare. The doctor went on swiftly.

“Again I shall use the cosmic ray as a carrier beam. The thing is far too complicated to explain, nor have I time. For three months now I have been working on the final problem—timing the explosion so that it will occur at the right moment. The strength of the cosmic ray will naturally be much more powerful at its source. My calculations are based upon that. I’ll let the ray itself explode the thernolyn. Jim—I’ll need your help. The rest of you can do as you wish. But don’t go near the death ray barrier!”

“Can I help?” asked Harrison. The doctor grunted unpleasantly.

“By keeping out of my way, yes. Jim, here, knows little enough, but he has the rudiments of scientific knowledge. The rest of you—”

With a shrug he turned back to his microscope, beckoning to Marden. With a reassuring smile for Lorna, Marden picked up a pencil and moved to his uncle’s side.

The launching of the thernolyn sphere was unspectacular. The object was a glistening, metallic ball, about a foot in diameter, within which Dr. Kent had constructed the machinery which would send it into size. The liquid thernolyn was at the last moment poured into a valve in the side of the ball, and Kent, after a hasty reference to his sheaf of calculations, touched a protruding lever.

Very slowly at first the sphere began to increase in size. In a second it was two feet in diameter—three—eight—

It became tenuous. Dimly within it Marden glimpsed a complicated array of machinery, the glistening, whitish thernolyn. Then suddenly it seemed to leap up, towering to the horizon, a hazy ghost of a sphere. Marden seemed to be within it for one amazing second. It dwarfed the most colossal structure man had ever reared—

And it faded and was gone! Into size—rushing at stupendous speed toward the super-universe, bearing its cargo which meant salvation for Earth!

“Will it really have any effect?” asked Lorna. “A mere shadow—”

“It’ll be real enough—Outside,” Marden said. “As it grew the atoms making up its structure expanded, naturally. But if it reaches the super-universe, it’ll be quite as dense as the matter there. How long will it take, Uncle Leon?”

Dr. Kent pursed his lips.

“I’m not sure. There are so many loopholes, so many chances for error. Possibly in an hour. You see, its speed—its rate of growth—is increasing continually. The time-rate Outside is no doubt different—an hour to them might be a million years to us. Indeed, that’s the only reason I had time enough to make my preparations.”

“There’s nothing to do but wait, then,” Marden told Lorna. “I wish I knew what was going on outside this valley. Too bad the radio won’t work.”

“One thing I’m afraid of,” the doctor said slowly. “The cosmic ray is increasing in power. My death beams can’t battle it much longer. Indeed, it’s seeping through already. Look at that!”

He pointed to a small, rounded stone about as large as his fist which was on the ground near by. Without visible means of propulsion, it was moving slowly toward another stone several feet away. Burford, the promoter, stared with bulging eyes.

“Ye gods,” he murmured hoarsely. “Now I’m crazy too!”

Chuckling, Marden moved forward and picked up the stone. It seemed, oddly, to writhe and move beneath his fingers. He dropped it.

It bounced. A solid bit of rock—bounced! On hard ground, it bounded up several feet, and as Marden gasped in amazement, it went, in a series of little leaps, toward the other stone. It hit it with a little cracking sound, and apparently stuck to it. The grey surfaces of the stones seemed to crawl. Abruptly there was only one rock, twice the size of either of the two original ones.

“Life,” said Kent. “Atomic life. Growth—and adaptation.”

The ground shuddered beneath their feet. The joists of the house cracked ominously. “Maybe we’d better stay out here,” Harrison suggested, a frightened note in his voice.

“I’m going in to watch the screen,” said Dr. Kent. “We’ll be able to see the sphere on it when it becomes visible in the super-universe.”

Burford’s thick lips were moving soundlessly. Marden didn’t like the glassy stare of his pale eyes. Frightened, superstitious, there was no telling what the squat promoter might do. He determined to watch Burford closely.

Nearly an hour had passed. Little had happened. It had become a common sight to see stones crawling slowly along the ground, in curious, ameboid movement. Too, the ground itself seemed oddly unstable, prone to shaking and giving dangerously beneath one’s feet. The house, in the very center of the invisible barrier of death rays, was little affected as yet. Once a chandelier had dropped to shatter on the floor. Occasionally a window would smash for no visible reason.

Marden alternated between his uncle’s laboratory, where Dr. Kent sat with his eyes glued on the screen showing the super-world, and outside the house, where the others wandered about in a somewhat dazed fashion. He watched Burford covertly. It was clear that the man was cracking under the strain.

His lips moved continually, and frequently Marden would catch such phrases as: “. . . Judgment day . . . all goin’ to die . . . end of the world . . .” And once the man had turned to shout at him, “We’ll all be dead pretty soon. We gotta make the most of life now!”

Marden had moved forward to quiet him, but the promoter had become silent abruptly as Lorna came into view around the corner of the house.

“Okay,” he said to Marden’s sharp remonstrance. “Forget it, buddy. I’ll be all right.”

Marden wasn’t so sure. Nor was he surprised when, a few minutes later, while standing beside his uncle watching the screen, he heard an angry shout from outside the house. Swiftly he was on his feet, racing for the door.

Lorna was struggling in the grip of Burford, trying to evade the kisses he was planting on her averted face. Harrison, the college boy, was sitting nearby staring around dazedly. A blue welt was rising on his chin.

“Stop it, Burford!” Marden snapped. The promoter’s head jerked back, and quickly he released the girl. She leaped away, pausing in the doorway of the house as Marden lunged forward. He had seen Burford’s hand dive beneath his coat, and he guessed what that meant.

He was right. Burford’s hand came out with a gun. But he didn’t squeeze the trigger. He lashed out viciously at Marden, brought the barrel crashing against the man’s head. The world went black.

Dimly Marden heard a scream. He got to his feet, fighting back his dizziness, just in time to see Harrison stagger into the house. The others had vanished.

Marden got to his feet and followed Harrison. From the laboratory came a cry, and the crashing of glass and metal. In the doorway Marden stopped, swaying.

Burford was backed against a wall, his gun menacing the three figures who stood facing him—Lorna, Harrison, and Dr. Kent. A tangle of wreckage on the floor beside an overturned table betrayed the struggle that had taken place.

“You fool!” Kent shouted. “That’s the ray projector—the death ray—and you’ve wrecked it! We’re unprotected now!”

“Shut up!” Burford snarled. “I’m gonna live the last few minutes of my life.” He waved his gun at them.

Suddenly the floor shuddered. Joists creaked ominously overhead. Somewhere a pane of glass shattered.

Marden sent his body hurtling forward. Burford had not yet seen him, and there was a chance—

The gun roared. A bullet screamed by Marden’s head, buried itself in the wall. There was an unnaturally loud rending of wood. Marden hit Burford’s legs, sent him hurtling back.

According to all natural laws, the promoter’s gross body should have smashed against the wall with an impact that would have driven the breath from his body. But the wall wasn’t there! Marden had a flashing glimpse of wallpaper stretching and ripping, of a gap appearing in the solid wall as Burford’s body was flung back; and then the two lay, dazed and incredulous, on the floor—half in one room, half in another. There was a four foot gap in the wall reaching from floor to ceiling.

Faintly he heard Dr. Kent’s triumphant cry.

“The sphere! It’s there—it’s Outside!”

He knew that the tiny, glistening globe bearing the deadly thernolyn had at last become visible on the screen, had at last reached the super-universe. Whether it would explode or not

The fate of a Universe hung on that question. But at the moment Marden was concerned with a more immediate problem. Burford, half pinned beneath his opponent’s body, had wrenched his arm free, had swung it up until the gun pointed at Marden’s face. The muzzle seemed to be growing larger and larger as the promoter’s finger tightened on the trigger.

A look of astonished horror came over Burford’s face. He was staring, not at Marden, but at the revolver in his hand. So was Marden. It was no longer a gun.

It was alive!

The barrel twisted like a snake. It seemed to grow shorter. It was a blob of shapeless, bluish metal in Burford’s thick hand. The man screamed in agony.

His fingers were caught in the writhing metal as it contracted. Blood spurted out suddenly, splashing Marden’s face. He didn’t move, even though he heard a crashing of falling timbers.

The floor twisted and swayed beneath him. He felt himself flung up as though on the crest of a wave—up and up, until his head struck something with a sickening crack. He knew it was the ceiling.

He heard Lorna scream, heard Kent and Harrison shouting. Somewhere metal crashed. The world had gone insane.

All over Earth, in that incredible moment, fantastic scenes were being enacted. For twenty-four hours inexplicable things had been happening. No one could explain them. Newspapers had carried flaming scareheads until the presses had refused to operate. But not until the last moment had the cosmic ray sent its full power roaring through the Universe, the stupendous power of unchained life that had sent a nebula thundering from its course. In that tremendous second when the earth lived men went mad and death stalked unbridled.

Prometheus unbound! The power of life was no longer limited to organic matter, and the cosmic ray ruled over an Earth gone mad!

A truck driver jammed on his brakes as the ground swayed beneath him, and stared with bulging eyes at the Los Angeles City Hall, towering in white majesty. The Southern California city's only skyscraper was moving! It was gliding out into the street, crushing buildings in its path, hurtling relentlessly toward the man in the truck. He jumped out of the vehicle and started to run. There was a grinding, thunderous roar, and he threw a terrified glance over his shoulder at an eidolon of smooth white blankness that was almost upon him.

The building seemed to be melting down to shapelessness—its outlines were blurring, the corners rounding, the tower becoming a mere blob. He screamed as he was engulfed, and then a thing like a puddle of animate stone was smashing its way along Broadway.

In a New England cemetery the watchman was having a quiet smoke as he leaned against a tombstone, pondering over the curious events of the preceding hours. He felt an uneasy stir beneath his feet and got up quickly. He hoped it wasn't an earthquake.

It wasn't. Out of a crack in the grass-covered earth something was seeping up—something which the watchman knew very well he had seen buried there three weeks before. It looked almost human for a moment, and then became a horrific mass of monstrous flesh and bone that seethed and bubbled as it crept toward him. The watchman was frozen with horror. He thought it was merely a dead man coming to life.

He didn't know that it was the atoms in the dead body which had come to life. There was no intelligence—the original organic vitality had fled forever. This was something different. Adaptation and—growth.

The thing touched his feet, flowed up around his legs. He felt a sharp pain biting through his body as his flesh coalesced with the horror—which was merely following its natural instinct of feeding so that it might grow, just as the two rocks had merged in Dr. Kent's garden. The watchman stared silently at the tide of horror creeping up his body, and little flecks of foam appeared on his lips.

And adaptation. In the Pacific Ocean, the crater of Mauna Loa had become unusually active. Natives eyed the mountain with apprehension, whispering of the Old Woman who is supposed to dwell beneath the volcano and breathe out flame when she is angry with her worshippers. An aviator, flying low over the crater, battled to hold his plane steady while his co-pilot watched with incredulous eyes.

The crater appeared to be widening.

Actually, the mountain was spreading out. The intense heat of the molten lava had caused the atoms of the mountain some obscure discomfort, and it was simply going away to a cooler place. The peak seemed to roll away on all sides, like a flood of lava descending. But it wasn't lava. It was Mauna Loa, spreading out in a great circle, wiping out all life, and coming to rest at last under the ocean that surrounded the island. The tremendous air-currents tore the wings from the plane, and it dropped like a plummet to destruction.

In the Adelphi Theatre, in London, a dancer was pirouetting about the stage, wearing a skimpy but adequate garment of steel-mesh. She came to a halt in the center of the stage, with the spotlight focused upon her, striking a climactic pose. Abruptly the mesh cloth which was her sole garment seemed to crawl over her body, and dropped to a tiny puddle of glistening silver at her feet. The audience applauded wildly, heedless of the shrieks of a fat matron in the dress circle whose several dozen diamonds had suddenly decided to unite.

They raced over her plump bosom, sending her into hysterics, and, fusing in her lap, turned into carbon—ordinary coal. A quite natural phenomenon, under the circumstances, but one which caused the matron to drop dead of heart failure.

A European dictator, reviewing his army, was extremely pleased with a new type of war tank, capable, as one of his generals explained, of killing forty times as many men as the tanks used in the World War. While examining the interior of the tank, the dictator cracked a joke, at which his general laughed dutifully.



Some obscure vibration in the man's bellowing laugh had an important effect upon the metallic atoms surrounding them. Soldiers standing at attention outside were treated to the

spectacle of the slow collapse of the tank, while the men imprisoned within it screamed vainly for aid.

Neither the dictator nor the general survived.

In Sing Sing prison, a man, waiting to be hanged, was pleased to discover that the bars which held him prisoner were melting into a wholly inadequate little fence on the threshold. However, as he was about to leave, he inadvertently stumbled against the stone wall of his cell, and a hole appeared in the concrete large enough to permit easy egress.

At this he decided he was dreaming, and therefore remained where he was.

In a little valley in the California mountains Jim Marden was pinned between the ceiling and a floor that had risen like a wave, listening to his uncle's exultant shout:

"I've done it! By the Lord Harry, I've done it! The sphere's exploded!"

Marden will always regret that he did not see the screen at that last climactic moment. There was really little to see, Dr. Kent told him later. The tiny, shining ball had suddenly appeared on the screen in the midst of the other-world microscope, and as suddenly the screen had flared up in a blaze of white light—and had gone blank.

The explosion had undoubtedly wrecked the Outside microscope, if not the entire alien laboratory, and simultaneously the cosmic ray had ceased to function.

Marden managed to extricate himself, and clamber down a steep slope that had once been part of the floor. Burford, they found, was dead. He had been crushed between ceiling and floor, a fate which Marden himself had escaped by the narrowest of margins. Neither Harrison nor Lorna was seriously injured.

They were glad to get out of the wrecked house, and for a little while stood silent in the dusk, staring around at a world that seemed, oddly, little changed. After a time Kent said, "There'll be reconstruction. Man has survived, undoubtedly. And he'll rebuild. In fifty years—twenty-five—there'll be no trace of this catastrophe."

"There'll be no—recurrence?" Harrison asked weakly. The doctor shook his head.

"According to our time-sense, it'll be thousands of years, maybe millions, before those Outside can replace their apparatus. A day or a week to them—and an age to us. Even so, how can they find an atom? No, the Universe is safe now—forever, I think."

"The cosmic ray is gone?" Marden inquired. "We're still alive, though."

"Of course. The ray only *creates* life. After it is created, it can exist independently. Luckily, the life of the atoms was transient. There was not sufficient time for them to reach a point where they could continue their life after the cosmic ray had been destroyed. It's the same old Earth, Jim."

Marden didn't answer. Kent looked up.

His nephew was very close to Lorna, and she was smiling up at him. Harrison said something inaudible, and then glanced at the doctor, shrugging resignedly.

Dr. Kent grinned.

"Yes," he observed with relish. "It's the same old world!"

[The end of *When the Earth Lived* by Henry Kuttner]