

An Adventure in the Fourth Dimension

by Farnsworth Wright, 1888-1940

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THE thought of meteors terrifies me. They have a disagreeable habit of coming down and killing people at the most inopportune times. That is why I was so startled when I saw a large object hurtling toward me out of the sky, as I was walking along the lake front recently in my city of Chicago.

I shivered. Was this the end? I began to say my prayers. To my astonishment, the onrushing missile struck the grass beside me without the slightest jar.

I gasped.

Thousands of singular objects began to detach themselves. They bounded from the mass, and suddenly increased in size from one inch to three feet in diameter. They were entirely round, and covered with teeth. On each tooth were ten ears, constantly in motion. Each ear carried a quizzical eye.

The dwarfish creatures rolled rapidly on the ground, the ears serving as legs, hands, tentacles and what not, propelling them with incredible speed. Sometimes they stood on only four or five of their ears, then suddenly pressed hard against the ground with half a thousand ears at once, thus bounding high into the air. They lit without jar, for the ears acted as shock absorbers and broke their fall.

"Surely these are explorers from Mars or Venus," I thought, as the funny bounding creatures filled the air.

"You are wrong. They are Jupiterians," said a voice beside me.

I recognized the voice. It was Professor Nutt. You probably know him.

"Ahem," he said. "Ahem, ahem!" And once more he repeated, "Ahem!"

"Interesting, if true," I remarked. "And what might Jupiterians be?"

"They might be men, but they're not," he snapped. "They are people from the planet Jupiter. Out of your ignorance you thought they might be Martians or Venusians, but you are wrong, for Mars and Venus have people of three dimensions, like ourselves. Jupiterians are entirely different. There are six hundred thousand of them in this Jupiterian airship."

I was so overjoyed at finding someone who could tell me about them, that I didn't think to ask him how he knew all these startling facts.

"Where is the airship you speak of?" I asked.

"There it is," he answered, rather grandiloquently, and pointed to an empty spot on the grass.

I looked carefully, and made out a vast, transparent globe, apparently of glass, which was rapidly becoming visible because of the Chicago dust that was settling upon it. I approached, and touched it with my hand. It gave forth a metallic ring.

"Aha!" laughed the professor. "You thought it was glass, but it is made of Jupiterian steel. Look out!"

I sprang back at his warning, and the last hundred thousand leapt out of the globe, passing right through the transparent metal of which it was composed.

"*Nom de mademoiselle!*" I exclaimed, in astonishment. This was a swear word I had learned in France when I was in the army.

"*Nom de mademoiselle!*" I repeated, for I liked to show off my knowledge of the language. "How can they pass through the glass without breaking it?"

"Through the Jupiterian steel, you mean," said Professor Nutt, severely. "I told you before that it is not glass. Jupiterian steel has four dimensions, and they pass through the fourth dimension. That is why you can't see the metal, for your eyes are only three-dimensional."

"Are the Jupiterian people four-dimensional?" I asked, awed.

"Certainly," said Nutt, rather irritably.

"Then how is it that I can see them?" I exclaimed triumphantly.

"You see only three of their four dimensions," he replied. "The other one is inside."

I turned to look again at the Jupiterians, who now covered the whole waterfront. One of them sprang lightly, fifty feet into the air, extended a hundred ears like tentacles, and seized an English sparrow. He crushed the sparrow with some score or more of his teeth, which, as I have said, covered his whole body. In less than a minute the poor bird was chewed to pieces. I looked closer, and saw that the Jupiterian had no mouth.

"*Nom de mademoiselle!*" I exclaimed, for the third time. "How can it get the bird into its stomach?"

"Through the fourth dimension," said Professor Nutt.

It was true. The chewed-up pieces of the bird were suddenly tossed into the air, and the Jupiterian sprang lightly after them. In midair he turned inside out, caught the pieces of the bird in his stomach, and lit on the grass again right side up with care.

"Did you see that?" I exclaimed, in a hushed voice. "Why can't I turn inside out that way?"

"Because you are not four-dimensional," replied the professor, a trace of annoyance in his voice. "It is a beautiful thing to have four dimensions," he rhapsodized. "Your Jupiterian is your only true intellectual, for he alone can truly reflect. He turns his gaze in upon himself."

"And sees what he had for breakfast?" I gasped. "And what his neighbors had, too?"

"Your questions are childish," said the professor, wearily. "A Jupiterian, of course, can look into the soul of things, and see what his neighbors had for breakfast, as you so vulgarly express it. But Jupiterians turn their thoughts to higher things."

The creatures now surrounded me, their ears turned inward, as if they were supplicating.

"What do they want?" I asked the professor.

"They want something to drink," he replied. "They are pointing their ears toward their stomachs to show that they are thirsty."

"Oh," I said, and pointed toward the lake. "There is the fresh, cool water of the lake, if they are thirsty."

"Don't be fantastic," said Professor Nutt. "It isn't water they want."

He fixed his stern, pitiless gaze on my hip pocket. I turned pale, for it was my last pint. But I had to submit. If you have ever had Professor Nutt's cold, accusing eyes on you, you will know just how I felt.

I drew the flask from my pocket, and handed it to the chief Jupiterian, who waggled his ears in joy. Immediately there was pandemonium, if you know what I mean. Ten thousand times ten thousand ears seized the cork, and pulled it out with a resounding pop. One thirsty Jupiterian passed right through the glass into the bottle in his eagerness to get at the contents, and nearly drowned for his pains.

"You see how useful it is to be four-dimensional," remarked the professor. "You could get into any cellar in the world by merely passing through the walls. And into any beer-keg in the same way."

"But," I argued, "how did this—this insect get through the glass into the whisky bottle? Glass has only three dimensions, like everything else in this world."

"Don't call him an insect!" Nutt sharply reprimanded me. "He is a Jupiterian, and as such he is infinitely superior to you and me. He passed through the glass because he is four-dimensional, even though the glass isn't. If you had four dimensions, you could untie any knot by merely passing it through itself. You could turn inside out, or pass through yourself until your right hand became your left hand, and change into your own image as you see it in the looking-glass."

"*Nom de mademoiselle!*" I exclaimed, for the fourth time.

A distant noise of barking was borne to my ears by the breeze. All the dogs in the city seemed to have gone wild.

"They are disturbed by the talking of the Jupiterians," explained the professor. "It is too high-pitched for clodhopper human ears to hear, unless they have an unusual range, but the dogs can hear it plainly."

I listened, and finally made out a very shrill humming, higher than any sound I had ever heard before in my life, and infinitely sweet and piercing.

"Ah, I am hearing four-dimensional sounds," I thought, aloud.

"Wrong, as usual," exacerbated the professor, with much heat. "Sound has no dimensions. It proceeds in waves, and bends back upon itself until it meets itself at an infinite distance from the starting-point. There are three reasons why you can't hear the music of the spheres: first because it is bent away from the earth by the force of gravity as it passes the sun; second, because your ears are not attuned to so shrill a sound; and third, because there is no music of the spheres. The first two reasons are really unnecessary, in the light of the third, but a scientific mind such as mine is not content with one reason when three can be adduced just as easily,"

"Shades of Sir Oliver Lodge!" I ejaculated.

"Sir Oliver is alive," the professor corrected me. "A man does not become a shade until after his death. Then he becomes a four-dimensional creature like the Jupiterians, only different."

"*Nom de mademoiselle!*" I commented.

"Say something sensible," he reprimanded me.

"For the love of Einstein, how do you know all these things about the Jupiterians?" I asked, a sudden suspicion flashing across what I am pleased to call my mind.

"Ah, Einstein, yes," exclaimed Nutt, greatly pleased. "My mother's father's name was Einstein."

"Then you are related to—"

"No, I am not related," he interrupted, "but my mother's father is."

"A sort of fourth-dimensional relationship, I suppose," I remarked sarcastically.

At that moment the air became vibrant with an invisible sound. The Jupiterians came rolling from all directions, as if they had suddenly heard the dinner bell. They bounded through the Jupiterian steel of the globe, and immediately shrank in size from three feet to one inch.

"The Jupiterian assembly call just blew," explained the professor. "Notice how the passengers draw into themselves. Six hundred thousand are now packed into that globe. Our elevated railroads miss a great opportunity by not having four-dimensional creatures to deal with."

"They pack us in just as tight," I ventured to remark.

The globe had begun to shoot into the air, when there came from behind me a high-pitched wail of distress—a shriller and higher sound than had ever before been heard by human ears, so the professor assured me. The chief Jupiterian had been left behind. He it was who had passed into the whisky bottle. Not content with getting the lion's share of the contents, he had surrounded the bottle, in his pleasant four-dimensional way, and now he could not get rid of it.

"Why doesn't he turn inside out again, and drop the bottle?" I asked, watching the Jupiterian with interest.

"Because your whisky has paralyzed him," answered the professor. "He is quite helpless."

I looked at the globe, which had alighted again. Each Jupiterian suddenly resumed his full size, in a brave attempt to bound to the assistance of his chief. But the creatures could no longer pass through the four-dimensional metal of which the globe was composed. So thick a layer of Chicago dust had settled upon it, that to all intents and purposes it had become three-dimensional. The sudden impact of six hundred thousand bodies caused it to burst, with a roar as of a hundred peals of thunder exploding simultaneously. The air was filled with dead and dying Jupiterians. A dark cloud, composed of the flying dust shaken from the Jupiterian globe by the explosion, settled over the landscape. Long streamers of electric fire shot from the fragments of the airship, and seemed to curve in upon themselves. Everything ran in curves—the darkness, the cloud, the sounds, the shafts of light—as if bent in by the force of gravity.

I put up my hands and fought the cloud that was settling down upon me. I seemed to be covered with falling feathers, when the cloud began to lift I found myself in my own parlor. The air was full of flying leaves, which I was madly tearing from a book and throwing toward the ceiling. The book was a treatise on the Einstein theory of space, which I had borrowed from a friend that afternoon. I had read nearly a page in it before I fell asleep.

Only twelve men in the whole world understand the Einstein theory, it is said. If I had read the book, I should have been the thirteenth, and that would be unlucky. So it is just as well that it is destroyed. But what excuse am I to give my friend for tearing up his book?

