

The Emperor of the Stars

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

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Published: 1931
in »Wonder Stories«



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Chapter I

Off Course.

"WE'RE a quarter of a million miles off our course!"

Joe Burns looked up from the oxygenation apparatus, whose valves he had been adjusting. "That's lovely! What's happened?"

"Don't know," replied Al Fries, navigator of the first terrestrial expedition to the planet Pluto, outpost of the solar system. "We've swung that much off in the last four hours. And I can't find a damn thing wrong. Speed relative to the Sun hasn't varied from a steady thousand miles per second. Corrective side rockets have exploded regularly and the meters show full power.

"I've checked and re-checked my calculations till I'm dizzy. All correct. Didn't want to tell you till I was sure I couldn't find the error. No use bothering you, you've enough to do keeping us alive in here. Inside's your job, outside's mine. But I'm stuck now!"

They had passed Neptune in their flight, and were out in the untraveled reaches of space, midway in their journeying to the new planet.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand miles off, you say. Which way?" Burns' steady tones revealed no perturbation over the alarming news.

"Minus on the plane Alpha 45 deg. 10' 24"; on Gamma 12 deg. 10' 54".⁽¹⁻¹⁾

*Space navigation is plotted by reference to three planes having Earth as their common intersection, One of these planes (Alpha) is determined by the plane of the ecliptic, and uses therefore the celestial sphere. The others (Beta and Gamma) are at right angles to this plane and to each other.

"Perhaps we've gotten into the attraction sphere of some unknown planet," Burns suggested.

"Impossible. Any body which could exert enough attraction to swing us so rapidly off our course against the inertia our great speed gives us would be clearly apparent to the naked eye, or at least in our telescope. There isn't any. I've looked my eyes out. Besides, I've searched every direction with the gravito-statoscope* and found no evidence of any attractive force not accounted for by known bodies. You know that instrument will respond to the attraction of a grain of dust at a distance of five hundred miles. No, Joe, there just isn't any explanation."

"Have you tried the emergency corrective rockets?"

"Sure have. Used as many as I dared. The explosions didn't have the slightest effect!"

"Hell, Al, you must be off your nut. What you tell me just can't be so. Wish I knew enough math to check your figures. Not that I haven't all the confidence in the world—I mean universe—in you, but maybe this long lonesome journey is getting at you."

Fries paled. "Do you really think that's it, Joe?"

The chemist laughed. "Oh forget it, old boy. Of course I didn't mean it. But you stop thinking along that line or it will be so. Here, let me get at that telescope—I'll find the mischief-maker."

Joe stepped smilingly to the eye-piece of the powerful electro-optical refractor. He turned one or two gleaming thumb-screws, then squinted into the tube. The smile slowly died from his face, instead a look of amazement took its place that turned to terror. His face was white. "Al, come here!" he whispered.

"What is it, what do you see?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you looking like that?"

"I said *nothing*, not nothing *new*! I see absolutely *nothing*!"

"What!" Fries almost shouted. "Here, give me that 'scope."

In his turn the navigator gazed long and searchingly through the eyepiece. His bronzed face too, betrayed the blood withdrawn, called back to an affrighted heart.

IN all that vast sky, space had been swept clean! Nothing but blackness. The numberless points of dazzling lights that were great worlds and huge suns had gone as if some cosmic hand had erased them from the skies! Their staunch ship floated in total emptiness!

"Al, look here, look!" Burns, imperturbable no longer, was pointing with trembling finger to the bank of white dials.

Fries looked. The pointer of every instrument, showing their relation to some outside body, was at zero! The velocimeter, the deviatoscope, even the gravito-statoscope. None was functioning!

The two adventurers gazed at each other in blank wonderment. What could this mean? It could not be true, that they had passed beyond all other matter, that they were alone in space, that within the shell of this little space-flier was the entire material universe! Incredible!

And yet—what other explanation could there be?

While still their reeling brains strove with the problem, there was a lurch—one only—a flash of blinding light at the quartz porthole—then all was as before. But no—Joe's fingers dug into Al's arm, as with his free hand he again pointed to the banked dials.

They were functioning once again! But how! It seemed as though all these staid mathematical instruments had gone suddenly crazy.

The pointer of the velocimeter was swinging wildly against the brass pin at the zero line in an endeavor to push past it. As though it were trying to register negative velocity! The deviatoscope was wobbling in all directions at once. The gravito-statoscope was registering negative quantities, indicating tremendous repulsion.

"My God, have the instruments been put out of commission, or have we gotten into a topsy-turvy world?" cried Al, rushing to the telescope, while Joe jumped for the porthole. Simultaneous exclamations burst from both.

No longer was there the black of unlit space; but neither were there the shining points of light, the old familiar constellations spangling the velvet back drop of space. Instead they were swimming in an intense blue light deeper by far than the fairest earth sky. Against the blue were silhouetted black disks and lesser points—myriads of them.

The Earth-men stared at each other blankly. Joe spoke first. "Where are we? What has happened to us?"

Al was frankly stumped. "I don't know. This is not our world, our universe. I may be crazy but maybe we've been pushed into a different universe. That might account for the strange gyrations of our instruments." He warmed to the idea. "After all, there's something in that. According to Einstein our space, our universe, is curved around into an enormous sphere. True, he assumes that there is absolutely nothing inside or outside that sphere, not even emptiness.

"But suppose he were wrong. Suppose that there are other universes, all spheres of space, floating in a great super-space. Suppose that one of these sphere universes in some manner impinged on our space, tangentially. Through a freak of fortune we happened to hit that one spot. Since the two spaces touch, we went hurtling from our own familiar universe into this strange one, the existence of which has never even been dreamt of by our scientists."

"Impossible," gasped Joe. "I can't believe it." He shook his head as though his disbelief gave him no comfort.

Once more they gazed out at the unknown. In the blue radiance, the black disks had grown perceptibly smaller.

"Hello," cried Al, "we're being pushed away from those dark worlds, if worlds they really are."

"That's fine; maybe we'll be thrown clear back into our world again." Joe's face showed that slowly he was yielding to the belief that this impossible thing must have happened.

"What," Al yelled in his indignation. "Do you mean to stand there and tell me that you are willing to leave all this—the greatest, the most sensational adventure that happened to mortal men, without even a look around?"

"All right, keep your shirt on," retorted the castigated one. "If you want to investigate this nightmare I'm with you. Only please remember, that as it is, we have only an infinitely small chance of locating that one small point of contact again. And if we move about here, we'll lose that one chance."

But the fire of the pioneering scientist blazed too brightly in Al. "I don't care what happens. We stay. Think of it, man, a new, a different universe!"

"You're the doctor. I hope though, we find a world we can live on. And some interesting people. For make up your mind we'll never see old Terra Firma again."

Al ignored him. "Hm, there doesn't seem to be any gravity here. We're being repelled instead of attracted. Tell you what you do, Joe. Use some of our rear rockets. That'll force us ahead."

Accordingly, two rockets were fired. Intently Al watched the instrument board. Sure enough, the velocimeter registered a forward velocity, the deviatoscope acted

normally again; only the gravito-statoscope continued to evidence repelling influences.

A Topsy-Turvy World.

AS they drove ahead, both men watched the new heavens anxiously. One of the black disks was gradually disengaging itself from its fellows, and growing slowly, perceptibly larger. About the size of the moon now.

Al looked once more at his instruments. Their velocity was decreasing. "Shoot off another rocket, Joe," he ordered. Once more they forged ahead.

"Queer sort of matter in this world," he continued, ruminatively. "Repels us instead of attracting. Everything seems just the reverse of what we know. The space glows and the stars are dark. And I see no evidence of suns or anything to account for the queer blue light."

Meanwhile the dark world they were aiming for, was growing steadily larger. Then a queer thing happened. The nearer they approached, the higher it rose above them, until it was directly overhead, a vast ball filling half the firmament.

Joe was surprised, and told his friend so. "Not at all," Al responded. "Up and down are purely relative terms that have no meaning in space. It is only when you come within range of matter, that these words have any significance.

"In our universe, a material body, responding to gravitational influences, attracts your body to it. In other words, you fall toward it,—which means that the attracting body is beneath.

"Here in this universe, on the contrary, matter possesses only the property of repulsion. You are driven away from the world; in other words, you are falling from it,—which means that this world is overhead as far as we are concerned. To reach it, we shall have to climb straight up."

"Then how in blazes are we going to land on it to see what it's all about. We'll be like flies on a ceiling."

"You're right," Al confessed. "I didn't think of that. However, we'll get as close as we can, and see what we can discover."

With the aid of rockets, they drove on and up, until they touched the huge ceiling.

The two gazed out upon an illimitable expanse of black lava-like rock, craggy and bare. No life, no movement was visible in the spectral blue glare that beat upon the immense rocky plain. Indeed, no life as we know it could be possible, for aside from the difficulty of clinging to a ceiling of rock, Joe's tests quickly showed the absence of any atmosphere.

"I can't see the sense of wasting any more time hanging here," he said finally. "Let's try and find a more inviting world."

"Hold on a moment, what's that?" Al was pointing excitedly through the porthole.

Not half a mile off, a broad orange beam of light had suddenly shot out from the black surface. Even as they gazed, a long cylindrical object appeared at the base of the beam, steadied itself a moment, then shot out downward into space. Its flight

was so swift that it vanished instantaneously. The orange light contracted until it too disappeared.

"That's either an upside down volcanic eruption, or else—," Joe paused uncertainly.

"Or else—that's just what we're going to investigate." Al sprang to the controls. Rapidly he propelled the space-ship to the point where the orange ray had appeared, and hovered directly underneath it.

They gazed up at a huge inverted funnel, tapering on top to a flat narrow area.

"Turn on the searchlight, Joe. Let's see what's up there."

Obediently, Joe swung the parabolic reflector into focus, and turned on the current. An invisible ray stabbed through the blue space, impinged inside the funnel, and lit it up with a blinding light.

Al whistled. "Look how smooth the walls are, how regular the curve. That's an artificial orifice, Joe. And something just came out of it. I'm going in there to investigate."

"Hold on there. Don't let your enthusiasm run away with you," Joe cautioned. "In the first place, I've seen volcanic cones as smooth and regular as this one. And if it is—you remember that orange flare—another eruption while you're squinting at it will mean the end of this little expedition. Besides, this boat's too big to fit in there. And if we get out, what'll hold us and the ship from all flopping down—God knows where—in this crazy space."

"I'm not worrying much about the volcano idea," retorted Al. "As for our falling, just run us as far up into the opening as you can, and I'll attend to the rest. Careful that the air lock is on top, though."

Joe shook his head doubtfully, grumbled a bit, but followed instructions. Once snugly in position, the beams of the searchlight illuminated the interior. There was no question about it now—the funnel was patently artificial. The walls were of black polished stone; at the tip overhead was a flat slab of the same material. A circular incision, about four feet in diameter, was evident in the slab.

Chapter II

The Green Terrors.

AL was hastily donning his space suit, electrically heated and containing oxygen-respiratory apparatus.

"For God's sake, Al, what do you intend doing?" Joe cried out in alarm.

"Do? Tie this ship to the sides of the funnel so she stays put. Remember we have four steel rings welded on the outside of our ship."

By this time he had donned the suit; only the helmet was not yet clamped into position. He took out of the tool chest two huge steel spikes, two lengths of massive chain ending in huge hooks, an electric drill, and picked up a disruptor tube.

"Now I'm ready; you hold the boat steady while I work. When the ship's securely fastened, I'll wave in at the porthole. Then you get into your space suit, and climb out. Bring a crowbar along, and your disruptor tube."

He climbed up into the air lock, shut the panel behind him, slid open the outer panel, and climbed on top of the space flier.

He chose a spot in the polished rock close to one of the ship's steel rings. With the electric drill it was a matter of minutes to fashion a deep hole. Al then inserted a spike at an angle, slipped a length of chain over it. The chain was secure. Next he slipped the great hook at the other end, into the steel ring. Repeating the operation on the other side, the space-ship was hanging, securely fastened.

Then he waved in signal. Shortly Joe was clambering out also enclosed in a space-suit. He carried a long crowbar with him. Fortunately the top slab was only a few feet above their heads. With right good will, they shoved against the inside stone. It moved slightly. Greater grew their exertions. Finally it lifted, as though on a hinge. Eagerly they pushed harder, until it fell over inside, revealing a circular hole, through which an orange light streamed.

Al spoke through the wireless phone included in the helmet equipment. "Just give me a leg up, Joe, like a good fellow."

Joe bent, clasped his hands in front. Al put one foot onto the clasped hands and Joe heaved until he was able to clamber through the opening. Immediately he extended an arm down, and with great exertion, pulled Joe up alongside of him.

They found themselves at the bottom of a slanting well. Far in the distance was a circular opening through which an orange light filtered.

Slowly, laboriously they negotiated the steep climb. At last they emerged panting, into the orange glare.

What they saw was so inconceivably strange, so opposed to all their preconceived notions that they stood still, gasping with astonishment.

They were standing on a vast plain, composed of the same rocky material as the outside; bleak, barren, thrown into giant crags and mountains. There was no horizon; the plain curved upwards until it was lost in the distant haze. The whole atmosphere was bathed in an orange glow, emanating from a huge globe of fire overhead, the sun of this interior world.

No sign of life revealed itself in the hideous barrenness of the huge concavity.

"Good Lord, what is this anyway!" Joe spoke through his phone. "We have to climb up to land on this place, then bust our way through; and then we find ourselves standing inside a hollow shell, with a sun and everything. It's certainly confusing. And why, if this matter has no gravitation, as you say, but exercises a repulsive force, why isn't it down on this side too, so that we would fall kerplunk into this space also?"

"Because," Al spoke up, "that sun overhead must be the source of the repulsion. I get it all now. The waves of repulsion emanating from the sun keeps this shell properly spaced around it, and causes everything to be pushed against it, including us. That would give exactly the same effect, as far as we are concerned, as though we were held here by force of normal gravity. Furthermore, the repelling waves must penetrate this shell of material, and flow out into the blue space of this universe. That was why our ship was being forced away."

"How about removing our space suits? I always feel uncomfortable in them," Al continued.

"Just a moment while I test this atmosphere to see if it's livable."

Joe extracted from a pocket of his suit a clever little device. The turn of a valve, the pressure of a button, and an electric coil heated a sample of the atmosphere. A glance through the tiny spectroscope attachment, and its constitution was revealed.

"Oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide—the same gases that make up our air. And just about in the same proportions. Alright, Al, we can breathe this atmosphere. Off go the suits!"

Swiftly the two tore off their helmets, opened the zippers of the overalls. Quickly the protective garments were folded into compact bundles, stowed in the shoulder knapsacks prepared for their reception. The two drew in long breaths of air. It seemed good to breathe freely again, reckless of consequences, free from the everlasting necessity of watching dials, and switches, and levers.

"That's good! Glad to get rid of that synthetic mixture we've been living on ever since we left Mother Earth. Wonder if there's any life here."

"Let's scout around a bit, though from the looks of things, it doesn't seem likely. Yet how about that hinged slab, and the cylinder we saw shoot out of it?"

Meanwhile they explored the chaotic terrain. Suddenly, Joe halted. "What's that, behind that rock?"

Around a boulder, not far ahead, appeared a jelly-like creeper. As the startled Earth-men watched, the creeper swelled, expanded, and lo, there before them was a nightmare creature. Up it towered, a quivering green jelly, formless, yet multiform,—its malevolent aspect sent a thrill of horror through the adventurers.

"There's your specimen of life, Al. Hope you like it!"

Cautiously they approached the creature, disruptor tubes handy. Motionless, it appeared to be, unaware of their presence. They were about ten feet away, when suddenly, a tentacle spurted out from the formless mass, straight for Joe. So lightning swift was the attack that he barely had time to spring beyond its reach.

A cry from Al. Another and yet another of the horrible jelly masses had appeared from behind the strewn rocks. They were rolling rapidly nearer.

"I don't like this so much—let's get back to the ship while we can," Joe exclaimed.

"I'm afraid it's too late—we'll have to fight our way," Al replied grimly. "Look over there."

The entire plain was alive with the heaving forms of the protoplasmic denizens of this queer world. Especially were they numerous around the tunnel exit. The Earth-men were ringed about now with the quivering menaces—their ever-forming tentacles flicking out toward them with inconceivable rapidity.

Disruptor tubes in hand, the beleaguered explorers advanced toward the passage, their only chance being to blast a path to safety. The jellied bodies drew together solidly blocking the way. Simultaneously Joe and Al pressed the triggers of their weapons. The long pale beams sprang out, impinged upon the heaving forms.

A cry of despair burst involuntarily from both men. The disruptor rays had absolutely no effect upon these creatures. Matter was differently constituted here—earth forces were unable to break up these atoms.

All was lost! The end of the great adventure was near. In great waves the green terrors advanced. Desperately the men searched about for some opening, some gap through which to seek escape. There was none. Enringed, they stood at bay, defenseless, now that the disruptor tubes, potent weapons of destruction on earth, were useless.

As disaster bore down upon them, Al's thoughts flashed back to the commencement of their flight; the vast crowds gathered to see them off—aspirants for the great million dollar prize to the space navigators who first explored the pale planet, Pluto, enigma of the solar system.

Almost was the prize within their grasp. Another few hundred million miles and they would have reached Pluto. But now they were thrown into this. Now they were doomed, never to return, or bear witness to the wonders they had seen.

A clammy yielding tentacle encircled his body, dragging him down. Joe, too, was struggling in the grip of an amorphous monster. Desperately they fought, but to no avail. Even as they broke through one grip, another viscid tentacle would flow over them. Already they were being engulfed into the bodies of these creatures. What a horrible end—to be ingested alive—to be dissolved in the digestive fluids of these horribly strange green beings.

Even as the two had given up all hope, were weltering at the bottom of a mass of viscid, clammy matter, there was a sudden change. A shudder ran through the monstrous jelly engulfing them, the horrible stuff flowed away. They were left lying there, stunned, suffocated, senses reeling into oblivion, but still alive!

Strange Beings.

SLOWLY life flowed back into the adventurers. What had brought about this sudden change? What had saved them from certain extinction? They raised their heads, then dropped them with simultaneous groans. What nightmare was this they were living through? Impossible, the things they had seen! Again they looked about them. True enough, two shapes were standing there. But what shapes!

Two orange, dome-shaped creatures, somewhat like diving bells. The front of each bell was flattened, and in the center was a huge oval opening, covered by a translucent mica-like substance. Directly over and on each side of the opening protruded two antennae, at the end of which were round faceted knobs.

Beneath the orifice were two long waving tentacles, ending in two opposing spatulates. The whole dome or bell rested on innumerable little jointed legs, the creatures were able to travel with a fair degree of rapidity. Altogether they were not over three feet in height.

Joe and Al sprang to their feet. In the distance they could see a swelling mass of the green jelly-creatures that had so nearly done for them. Driving them on with green flashes from tubular weapons held in their tentacles, moved a horde of queer beings similar to the two immediately in front of them.

"Holy mackerel!" Joe exploded, "these things have saved our lives, alright, but what the devil are they? Bird, beast, or devil? Do you see the same thing as I, Al, or have I gone daffy?"

But Al was not listening. He had been watching the forms intently. "Look," he cried, gripping Joe's arm. "Look at that, will you!"

On the translucent mica-like coverings over the orifices, appeared reddish characters. There were four of them, delicate, intricate tracings, lit up by some interior fire. They resembled somewhat the old cuneiform writing of the Babylonians, or the Egyptian hieroglyphics. Even as the Earth-men watched with bated breath, the glyphs vanished, and others, different in form, took their place.

Al was greatly excited. "I believe they're trying to communicate with us. That membrane is a screen on which they can flash symbols that represent their language, just as we do in printing."

"Then how in blazes are we going to talk to them. Wonder if they can hear." Joe cupped his hands and shouted a great "Hello!"

There was not the slightest movement to show that they had heard, but at the gesture, strange fiery characters danced and changed with great rapidity on the screens.

Joe was disgusted. "What are we to do now? Draw pictures for them?"

"That isn't such a bad idea," declared Al. "But first we'll try pantomime."

Accordingly he pointed to the open doorway up through which they had come, and then with a sweep of his arm denoted their travels through far space.

For the first time, the creatures showed excitement. They shuffled their innumerable feet and waved their long tentacle arms. One of them propelled itself like a huge centipede to the jade slab and quickly shut it. On the screen of the other there flashed a scene—the deep blue of space in which whirled innumerable worlds.

Now it was Al who danced excitedly. "There you are, Joe," he cried, "they're making pictures for us, moving pictures; just what you spoke of so contemptuously. See, they've understood me." He nodded his head vigorously in confirmation.

Evidently this gesture was also comprehended, for the picture changed to one in which the Earth-men beheld themselves escorted along an alabaster road.

"They want us to go with them, Al; think it safe?"

"Safe?" echoed Al scornfully, "why, they couldn't hold me back. Miss up examining this civilization! I should say not!"

"All right, all right," Joe retorted good-naturedly. "Keep your shirt on; I'm going; just thought I'd ask."

Al in pantomime declared his willingness to go with them. Immediately one trotted ahead, while the other moved along with the two adventurers.

FOR a long time they moved across the black and dismal plain, swept clear now of the grim green menaces that so nearly had been their doom. Then they came to a precipitous ascent, up which a roughly hewed road spiralled. Breathless, the Earth-men reached the top. Then they stopped, thunderstruck.

They were gazing down upon a rolling landscape that gently undulated and curved upwards until lost in the haze. A warm, golden orange glow enveloped the

scene in a glamorous bath. Overhead shone the source of the illumination—a mild, kindly orange sun, whose rays were not too dazzling.

Below them stretched a view that made them catch their breaths.

A long, curving snow-white road led down into a deep valley. Filling the hollow was a vast city, a golden gleaming city of rounded shapes. Immense structures; domes, diving bells, magnified duplicates of their inhabitants.

Joe was the first to break the silence. "This is something like—. These people must have considerable brains and skill to build that wonderful city."

Al said nothing, but broke into a rapid walk, so fast this his guides could barely keep up with him. As for Joe, "Good Lord man, hold on a bit. I'm not in training for cross-country, you know."

Unwillingly Al slowed his pace. The true explorer's fervor blazed in him. As they descended into the valley, they began to meet more and more of the strange denizens. Without exception, each one that they met stopped short in his tracks, bright red symbols chasing each other intricately over his translucent screen, to be met with answering hieroglyphics from their guides.

"Sort of giving them the low down on us," Joe explained it. Invariably the curious one fell in behind until by the time they entered the city, they were accompanied by a veritable guard of honor.

On a broad white highway between the golden domes, mosaics of intricate designs in which gold predominated, went the procession. A weird soundless procession, except for the slight rustle of innumerable little feet.

It struck Joe for the first time. "Say, Al, have you noticed that there is no noise in this world. None of the usual sounds we're accustomed to. Positively uncanny, I think."

"It struck me too. These people cannot speak, and evidently cannot hear either. Because of the silence in nature. Were there natural sounds or noises, evolution would have equipped them also with the necessary apparatus."

Just then their guides swung onto a long ramp that led into a dome more magnificent than the rest. Guards at the entrance, armed with gleaming tridents, permitted them to enter, and promptly barred the way to the unofficial escort.

The vast interior was crowded with Prostaks (the name of these-bell-shaped people). On a raised platform at the farther end stood one taller than the rest. In one tentacle he carried a great trident whose prongs darted golden flames. Near him stood contemptuously,—if such earth terms could be applied to so strange a being—an *elongated cylinder*, entirely enclosed in a deep blue shimmering aura. Lifeless though it seemed, purely geometric its form—yet the explorers sensed immediately the presence of a living force—a malignant, evil influence that caused their flesh to prickle with nameless shudders.

"Good God, that damned cylinder is the center of something horrible, Joe," Al exclaimed involuntarily. "I feel it in my bones. These other people—I know they are kindly, gentle folk. I can sense it, even though they are so different from us. But that over there, it gives me the creeps."

Joe nodded soberly. "I had the same feeling as soon as I saw it. I'm afraid we're going to have trouble with that beastly figure before we're through. And these inhabitants, I think they already have felt the force of its devilry."

Chapter III

A Silent Drama.

EVEN as he spoke, the blue aura enfolding the cylinder began to flicker. Streamers shot out from it; long ones, then short, then long; evidently a sort of Morse code.

The imposing Prostak on the platform, whom the Earth-men already recognized as the ruler or King over these people, faced the other being with what seemed the greatest attention.

When the flickering streamers ceased, the Ruler bowed submissively. Instantly all the Prostaks in the hall tossed their tentacles about wildly, shuffled their little feet, while on the screens dashed a perfect frenzy of symbols. The uncanny silence was unbroken, but Joe and Al looked at each other. Both had felt it. Immense waves of lamentation exuded into the vitalized atmosphere—these people were suffering intensely. Within the Earth-men's breasts, hearts hammered suffocatingly under the surge of an immense pity.

"Al!" Joe whispered hoarsely, his eyes suspiciously wet.

"What is it?" responded Al in a queer choked voice.

"There's something damnable going on here!"

Al nodded fiercely. "I know it—I feel it."

Joe continued hurriedly. "That alien cylinder has just made some filthy demand on that big fellow—the Ruler here—and he was forced to give in. And all these poor people are crying inwardly—they haven't even the consolation of honest-to-goodness tears and wailing that we have. Some frightful doom is hanging over them."

"Wish we could do something to help."

"Hold your horses, Al. Mustn't go off half-cocked. Wait until we learn a bit more about things here before we butt in."

Their attention was once more attracted to the ivory platform. The Ruler was motioning with his huge trident to a group of guards armed with smaller tridents.

Instantly the guards set in motion. Down through the crowded hall they moved, the Prostaks shrinking and shuffling away from them with every evidence of terrible fright. Suddenly the guards swooped, and six frantically struggling figures were borne bodily to the platform. The Ruler emanated inutterable sadness, and a host of pallid red glyphs flashed in rapid succession on the thought screen. Afterwards, the Earth-men found they could detect the mental mood of the Prostaks from the depth of color of these Symbols. When the Prostak was cheerful and gay, the characters danced a brilliant red; when sad or uneasy, the red was dulled and pallid.

The guards carried their writhing victims down the length of the hall and out into the open. The vast concourse of people bowed down almost to the ground, their long spatulated tentacles waving wildly, heart-breakingly.

The cylinder stood erect, as though contemplating the despairing people. Was that a mocking leer that subtly emanated from it? Joe could have sworn it was.

Instinctively his hand reached for the revolver in his pocket. He had a wild desire to shoot down that alien tyrant.

Al saw his movement, and gripped his arm just in time. "For God's sake, Joe, stop it. Are you mad? You don't know what it's all about. And besides, you're liable to expose us to some terrible danger by your foolhardiness. Wait until we learn more about what's happening."

Grumbling, Joe allowed himself to be persuaded. He returned the weapon to its place. "I know damn well what it's all about. That grinning, leering cylinder—I'd like to shoot it full of holes and see what it's made of. But I suppose you're right—we'd better wait and get acquainted first." Notwithstanding his acquiescence, he sighed regretfully.

The blue cylinder began to flick out a message. Once more the King bowed in token of submission. Then the blue flames increased in volume, until the baleful cylinder was only faintly visible. Suddenly it shot up into the air, circled about the hall three times, (a derisive gesture, Joe thought) then darted straight for the roof of the dome. Without hesitation it plunged through the solid stone as though it were non-existent and disappeared. A nameless oppression, a foreboding of ultimate doom, lifted from the travelers' hearts with its passing.

Wrapped as they were in the mighty drama just terminated, no one had noticed the intrusion of these two visitors from another universe. But now the Prostaks discovered their presence, and once more excitement resumed its sway. The hall was filled with inquisitive waving tentacles, and their pictured remarks glowed with a livelier red.

The Ruler raised his body at the turmoil, and saw the cause of it. You could almost see his start of surprise. He held his golden trident aloft. The two guides, heretofore discreetly in the background, now pushed forward. The Earth-men followed.

A rapid exchange passed between the guides and their King. Then he turned to his visitors, and, raising his trident aloft, waved it three times. Al, who was already almost en rapport with this strange race, said to Joe. "He's evidently welcoming us."

Then picture began to flash on the oval screen. Intently they watched. They saw themselves being led through long corridors to a great hall, filled with bizarre machines, busily attended by Prostaks. "Looks like a scientific laboratory to me, Joe; he wants us to communicate with their scientists." Then they watched themselves going to other chambers, where food was served, and ultimately to a place where they stood motionless in fixed attitudes, when the pictures went blank.

"That must be their sleeping quarters. They must sleep standing up. In fact, I can't see how they could lie down if they wanted to," interjected Joe, proud of his acumen.

Al attempted in pantomime to show he understood. The King waved his trident once more, and two guards appeared. Ranging on either side of the explorers, they led them down a long corridor into a chamber full of queer apparatus, exactly as had been pictured to them. The scientist Prostaks came forward to greet them.

It would serve no good purpose to enter into a lengthy discussion of the methods employed to establish understandable communication between the

representatives of these so alien races; the slow and tortuous stumbling before a fair degree of success was attained.⁽³⁻²⁾

Suffice it to say that the Earth-men discovered that the symbols employed by the Prostaks were conventionalized ideographs, having originally been exact representations of objects and actions. They never were able to find out just by what living internal mechanism these beings were able to flash their pictures, or glyphs on the sensitive screen. As for the Earth-men's communication with them, Al, who was a clever sketcher, and fortunately had a note book and pencil along with him, employed his talent with great success. That and pantomime did the trick until the men learned the Prostak language and the meaning of the symbols. Then matters progressed smoothly, for they could sketch the characters to express their thoughts.

Almost the first question they asked, when understanding was established, was an explanation of that terrible drama in the Hall of the Ruler.

The chief scientist told them the story.

* * * * *

IN the center of the universe, he said, there existed a mighty Ruler, a being who, strangely enough, resembled most closely the Earth-men.

When he had come, no one knew. But many pilasters ago (a pilaster is ten months and twenty-one days), a vast transparent sphere had floated into their space. Inside the hollow shell, bathed in blue light, was observed the queer "human" creature. A maze of strange instruments surrounded him, whose use the Prostak scientists, watching eagerly through the funnel orifices with powerful telescopes, were unable to fathom.

Even as they gazed, the strange being manipulated various levers, and great streamers of cold blue light shot out into the black void of space, until the entire universe was luminescent with the glaring blue flames.

To the amazed view of the Prostaks, there were illumined innumerable dark worlds, similar to their own. Of the existence of these, they had been apprised for ages by means of mental communication with the inhabitants, but this was the first time the orbs had become visible. In the interiors were peoples and civilizations comparable to that of the Prostaks. By a system of thought transference the races of these hollow orbs could communicate with each other.

The History of a Race.

BUT some few of the rolling balls in space were uninhabited. Possibly, they thought, these barren worlds were solid throughout, and therefore unable to support life.

Attempts to establish communication with the strange new creature in the hollow transparent shell were unsuccessful. At length they resigned themselves to watching for further developments. These were not long in coming. The great sphere moved methodically from one to another of the dark solid worlds. In front of each it rested motionless in space. The man creature busied himself with his

instruments. Pale beams impinged steadily on the lifeless hulks, until to the watchers' vast astonishment, a deeper blue haze, strangely resembling an atmosphere, enveloped the dark spheres. Unbelievably, it seemed to cling to the surface, instead of being violently repelled into space.⁽³⁻³⁾

The scientists puzzled over the meaning of these strange events without success. Soon, too soon, were they to realize the full horror of this irruption into their hitherto peaceful universe.

One day they noticed that the strange, enclosed being was exceptionally active. Instrument after instrument whirled and gyrated. Suddenly, an elongated cylinder of blue flame leaped into life, passed through the transparency as though it did not exist, darted through space straight toward a sister world. With barely perceptible pause it shot through a tunnel opening, and disappeared into the interior.

Agog with excitement, the Prostaks attuned themselves to the thought waves of the orb, to learn the meaning of this strange invasion. They were not long left in the dark.

The cylinder of blue flame was demanding that a certain number of the Arkabs (the name of that race) be placed in elongated cylinders of its Master's contriving, whom it called "The Emperor of the Stars," and ejected into the void. They were to be drawn to the new worlds so strangely made livable by the Emperor, there to live and die as slaves, working his will, tilling the barren soil to grow the curious foods necessary for the well-being of the self-constituted Emperor. As the population grew from the enslaved beings of this and other worlds, certain secret plans were to be made effective. If they refused, the direst retribution was threatened.

Scornfully, the rulers of their sister world had rejected the barbarous terms. The strange cylinder betook itself haughtily back to its Master.

What followed was dreadful. First the heavens turned an intense blue. Then luminous blue streamers shot athwart the sky. Rapidly they approached the doomed world. They touched, enveloped it. Before the fascinated watchers' eyes it seemed to crumble, to disintegrate. When the terrible blue rays withdrew, the great world was gone—whiffed clean out of existence.

Since that demonstration of power, no world dared refuse its tribute. Rapidly the desolate worlds were populated by slaves from many spheres. By some strange power they remained on the surface and did not tumble off into the void. Many pilasters passed. Wearily, hopelessly, the slaves could be seen toiling, digging, performing strange tasks, under the cruel supervision of the Emperor's minions, the cylinders of blue.

Unknown growths appeared on the ground, were harvested, and carried in long cylinders to the glassy shell of the Emperor. Strange, oblong structures reared their heads on the colonized worlds; vast new cities of new shapes and forms. More and more slaves were demanded and procured from the subject races for the Emperor had found work for them digging minerals that he needed, refining them, etc.

Heretofore, the Prostaks had been unmolested. They grew confident in their immunity. They were exempt from the killing toll. Not for them the ghastly pall that overhung the denizens of other orbs.

Then suddenly, like the crack of doom, appeared the frightful messenger of the Emperor. In the universal sign language, he had made his demand for slaves. Six Prostaks were to be supplied regularly each dinaster (corresponding roughly to nine days).

After prolonged consultation, one Prostak, greatly daring, had volunteered to speed through space, to intercede with the Emperor direct. He had departed, it was his cylinder Joe and Al had seen leaving the surface of Prostakon. Almost immediately the messenger of the Emperor had reappeared in the council chamber. Gloatingly it had told of the enslavement of the hero ambassador. Then it had repeated the inexorable demand for tribute, reminded the horror-struck Prostaks of the fate of that other world that had dared to defy the Emperor.

There was nothing to do but submit. The Earth-men had witnessed the frightful scene of their seizure, and the universal lamentation of this gentle, kindly people. What they had not seen was the thrusting of the struggling victims into a cylinder awaiting them at the exit into outer space, and their ejection. Here the narrator paused; the hieroglyphics fading to the dullest red of despondency.

In a dreshiar more (slightly less than two days), another six of the wretched inhabitants must be sent to join the tribute from other worlds to glut the greed of the dread Emperor. Already the terrified Prostaks were fleeing the City, fearful that they might be seized in the next batch to go.

No longer would there be peace and the ordered pursuit of knowledge, the scientist concluded sadly. Now and forever, the people would be under the dreadful doom, none knowing whose turn was next. There was no hope but ultimate extinction.

The Earth-men had watched the pictured story with growing horror until the last symbol had faded away. Their hearts bled at the thought of this gentle race, so advanced in culture and achievements, fated to be the slaves to the ambitions of an alien Lord.

Simultaneously they looked at each other. Each read the resolve in the other's eyes.

Al wrote for the aged Prostak. "All may not be as hopeless as you think. Possibly we may be able to find some means to combat the fiend."

Startled, the scientist waved his antenna in a flickering hope, but then the dulled red characters appeared: "Nay, no one can hope to overcome him. He is mighty, the Emperor of the Stars. We are only finite beings. He is omnipotent—no puny weapon of ours can harm him. Alas, I am afraid our bitter destiny must be fulfilled."

"In the world from which we come, nothing is recognized as impossible," Al replied. "Though we cannot promise, we say again, hope on. Perhaps we shall be able to requite your kindness by delivering your nation from this menace."

With that, they left the unconvinced scientist.

Chapter IV

„We Shall Go!”

"WHAT have you in mind?" asked Joe eagerly, as they returned to their quarters. "I'd give a great deal to release these people from their horrible fate. I've honestly come to like them quite a bit."

"You may think it's damnably rash and dangerous," Al answered slowly, "what I'm going to propose. And it is, no question about it. But I feel the same way about the Prostaks as you do, and I for one am willing to take the chance. Here it is."

"You remember what the old Prostak told us about this Emperor. How strangely he resembles us in form. That he is an alien to this universe. And more particularly that he is able to endow matter with gravitational attraction, instead of the universal repulsion it has here. It occurs to me that possibly this potent Emperor is a being from some planet in our own system, or even—it is not too fantastic—a man from our own Earth. He might have been a scientist of extraordinary attainments, who had in secret discovered and developed new natural forces as yet unknown to us."

"An overweening ambition may have led him to the idea of conquering the planets of our Solar System with the forces under his control. Accordingly he built his vast hollow shell, which from the description seems to be made of pure fused quartz."

"Launching himself secretly into space, he intended to overpower and render subject each planet in turn. Some freak of destiny, just as in our case, led him to the exact tangential point with this universe, and precipitated him through."

"Adjusting himself quickly to the new conditions, he set about enslaving these kindly peaceful peoples. Now he is creating new worlds in the image of that one with which he was familiar."

"Can you conceive the upshot? A vast horde of trained, submissive subjects with which to win back to our universe? I dare not picture the fate of poor old Earth!" Al shuddered at the vivid image he himself had conjured up.

Joe became excited. "That settles it. We must conquer this scientist Emperor, not only for the sake of the Prostaks, but for that of our own world. But how?"

"I've thought of something. Just as our weapons proved ineffective against the alien matter and reversed natural laws of this universe, so the weapons of the denizens were unavailing against this marauder from our universe. On the other hand, our weapons may prove useful against this being who was originally subject to the laws of our space. Of course," Al continued, "this is all guesswork on my part. I may be absolutely wrong. But somehow I am convinced that we shall be able to defeat the Emperor of the Stars."

"But you still haven't told me what method of attack you expect to use," objected Joe.

"All," was the prompt retort. "If I knew exactly the nature of the Emperor, I could specify. But as I don't, we'll use every available method, and trust to luck that one is the right one. We have our ray projectors, our atomic disruptors, our rocket bursts. One of these may be successful. Who knows?"

"I'm game to try it anyway," Joe declared. "The worst that can happen is that we don't come back. And I for one am not too keen about spending the rest of my days here, no matter how decent the Prostaks are. After all they're not our kind."

And I also have a hunch—laugh if you will—that our only chance of ever returning is connected in some way with this Emperor of theirs."

Al nodded. "I've also had the same feeling. It's agreed then. Everything on the ship's just as we left it, I'm sure, so everything is in readiness."

* * * * *

ONCE more the two Earth-men stood in the great hall. Once more the Ruler stood sadly on the platform. Again the mocking, malevolent cylinder radiated blue emanations on the right side of the King. The fatal day had come for the second tribute. The great hall was nearly empty. Almost every one had fled. Only the officials, the scientists were present—those whose pride or abounding courage did not permit them to seek safety in flight. Even though they stood their ground, who can say they were not desperately afraid!

Once more the cylinder made its foul demand; again with bowed body, the troubled Ruler acquiesced. His trident was raised aloft in signal to the guards to perform their odious duty, the very bravest shrank away in dread anticipation—when suddenly the evil ambassador stood erect, shot a blue ray in the direction of the Earth-men, as though in triumphant inquiry, then flashed staccato streamers toward the Prostak ruler. Al had learned to read this code also. An exclamation of horror froze on his lips.

"What is it?" Joe wanted to know.

"He is demanding that we two be a part of the tribute," Al cried.

"My God, we're cooked, done for," groaned Joe.

Just then the Ruler raised his body proudly erect, and angry, vivid red hieroglyphics chased each other rapidly across his thought screen.

Al dug his fingers deep into Joe's arm, joyfully, half unbelieving.

"My God, Joe, the old boy is a wonder. Know what he's saying to that damned cylinder? He's answering that we are his guests—the guests of the Prostaks. Never in all their history have they ever permitted harm to befall any strangers, any aliens who once had shared their hospitality. And he doesn't intend starting now. He will *not* deliver us to destruction, and the cylinder and his Master can be damned to it. (Al was translating rather freely in his excitement.) Rather his whole world be consumed by the tyrant than accede to this infernal demand."

A wave of soundless applause broke from the assembled Prostaks, even though the defiant speech of their King spelled certain destruction to all of them.

Joe's eyes positively blazed. "Al, it's wonderful, inconceivable, the nobility of this race. Think of our people on earth, and what they would say and do in a similar situation. Al!" he gripped his friend tightly with sudden alarm, "you're not going to let them sacrifice themselves like that to save us, are you?"

The reply was emphatic. "I should say not!"

Meanwhile the blue cylinder was sputtering an angry message. Very well then, it threatened, it would report to its Master, and retribution would be swift and terrible.

"Hold on a moment," Al cried out, darting forward, forgetting in his excitement that no one could hear him. Joe was close behind him.

Recollecting himself, Al dashed to a niche in the wall where was kept for him the thin black square and red chalk-like substance he used for conversation in public.

Quickly he dragged them out, and set to work to convey his message. Forgetful of all else in the tense drama of the moment, the Prostaks eagerly crowded about the pair.

"Noble Ruler of the Prostaks," Al sketched hastily, "we deeply appreciate your unexampled sacrifice, but we cannot permit it. This fair world of yours shall not be destroyed because of us. No, we are ready to go as tribute to this insatiable Emperor—this Monster of your universe. We visitors from another space are not afraid of him."

All over the vast hall, on one and all, danced in vivid red the single legend, iterated and reiterated. "No! no! no!"

"What a race!" murmured Joe, exultantly.

Again Al fiercely sketched. "We thank you—it is worthy of you. But our minds are made up, we *shall* go. Tell that damnable cylinder we shall be ready."

Sadly the Ruler bowed to their wishes. In symbols barely visible, he informed the ambassador of their acquiescence.

A Million to One Chance.

THERE was no question of it now. The blue cylinder flared in leering triumph. Once more it sprang up through the ceiling to speed the news to its powerful Master.

Left to themselves, the Prostaks tossed their tentacles in soundless uproar. They were expostulating angrily with their visitors for this violation of their ancient hospitality. With difficulty, Al managed to concentrate their attention to his writing. This once accomplished, however, they followed him closely without interruption. He explained just what he and Joe had in mind; their plans for battle with the Dread Lord, and the possible freeing of the universe for all time from its frightful doom. They would go alone in their own space ship to meet him in his very lair, the center of his power.

When he was done, a tremendous demonstration took place. The Prostaks grabbed drowningly at the straw just offered. Who knew—perhaps these aliens from outside their space might prove the saviors of their world.

Immediately, a vast procession formed to escort the daring Earth-men to the place where their ship was moored. As they moved along, more and more of the Prostaks flocked out of their hiding places, apprised by swift broadcasting of the meaning of the march.

"They're treating us like conquering heroes already," Joe smiled wryly at Al, "but to tell you the truth I don't feel like one at all. My knees are just a bit wobbly at the thought of what's ahead of us."

"Buck up, old man," Al encouraged him, "the worst that can happen is death. We must chance it. And I feel rather confident we can turn the trick."

"I'm not backing out," Joe replied earnestly. "I'm with you to the bitter end."

"I know you are, old fellow," Al said affectionately.

At last the procession reached the entrance hall of their first acquaintance. In the presence of their awestruck friends, they donned the space suits, and

descended the long ramp to the lower trap door. Opening it, they peered down into the funnel, and beheld their good old space flier still faithfully swinging as they had left it.

The Prostak scientists crowded at the trap door to gaze curiously at the strange contrivance of their visitors. Then the last farewells were said between these members of alien races—the Earth-men were choked with emotion—and they screwed their helmets in place.

The last they ever saw of this noble, gentle people as the trap closed were the waving tentacles and flaming characters equivalent to "God speed".

Into the air lock they passed; the mechanism functioned smoothly, and once more they found themselves in the familiar interior of the ship; ready to start on the most tremendous, the strangest adventure ever undertaken by mortal men!

The grapples were cast off. Immediately the space ship left the surface, rapidly the velocimeter needle passed up the dial, indicating greater and greater speed. Through the vast reaches of unknown space the devoted craft sped, fast in the grip of a force whose nature was unfathomable.

The adventurers were sober now. The lively curiosity, which had hitherto sustained them through the strange experiences which had thus far been their lot, was now overlaid by the knowledge that they were starting out to combat a vast and terrible unknown. In this weird universe, infinitely far from all that was familiar, they were challenging an obscene power, a power so great that it had subjugated an infinity of worlds, had dominated them and levied horrible tribute upon them. Was it conceivable that these two puny men, in their midget ship, could successfully meet and conquer so great a power?

With a wry grin Al spoke. "Joe, I think we are the prize fools of two universes. Why should we risk ourselves in this attempt, for the sake of worlds which are not even of our own universe? My wild surmise as to the danger to our own space is far-fetched. Let's think it over again, before it's too late. We can still turn aside—find another sphere where conditions are suitable for our existence—and pass the rest of our days in comfort! What do you say?"

The usually flippant Joe was very subdued now. Gravely he replied, "You know I dislike heroics, Al. Melodramatic speeches aren't in my line at all. But, isn't this a glorious way to die, if die we must? To set out, two little men in a little ship, to battle the master of a universe? Just think, what is the alternative? To land in one of these strange globes, to rot away our lives in an alien atmosphere.

"That may suit you, I don't want to pass out that way. Rather fail, but fail gloriously, in this great adventure, this wild, quixotic attempt to free a universe from slavery. Come, Al, pep up! I know what's on your mind. You feel that you got me into this, and it worries you. Forget it! When I joined up, I knew that the chances were a thousand to one against our ever getting back. They're a million to one now, what of it? Funny thing, I've got a hunch that we'll win through yet."

Fries stuck out his hand, grasped that of his friend in gratitude. "Thanks Joe, I feel better now. I did think that I had gotten you into something that I had no right to. Now that I know how you take it, I can carry on. We'll win through yet, they can't lick us. Let's go!"

Onward, ever onward, the space-ship rushed. The speed was terrific, black spheres rushed by with the speed of light. Ever brighter, ever more intense, grew

the blue of the firmament. A dull sense of foreboding settled down on the two friends, an oppressive sense of awe.

At last there came a time when the tremendous velocity of their progress began to slacken. By this time the glaring blue illumination had grown so intense that it was necessary to keep the portholes thickly covered. Only a tiny slit had been left, through which, eyes protected by thick-covered goggles, the adventurers took fleeting glimpses of the space around them. For long, now, they had passed beyond the last vestige of the dark worlds of this universe. There was nothing without but that intense blue glare.

Slower and slower, the ship seemed to hover in that interminable emptiness. A mere 500 miles per second was the speed indicated by the meter which Al had adjusted to the new condition of this new space. A mere 500 miles per second, but ever onward toward the unknown menace.

Bulking in the firmament ahead, now appeared the Thing they had sped to combat, the vast transparent shell of the Emperor of the Stars. A huge hollow sphere it was, almost a thousand feet across, of fused, clear quartz, the walls tremendously thick!

Chapter V

The Emperor of the Stars.

IN the center of the great hollow floated a disk that almost reached across the globe. On it appeared a hive of great machines and apparatus. Giant pistons slid back and forth, huge vacuum tubes glowed with electronic discharges, motors and dynamos were surging with power. Bathing all, and pulsing out into the unfathomable space, was the strange blue glare.

No sign of sentient life! Only the machines that spun and flared interminably.

An exclamation from Al as he peered through the telescope brought Joe to the other eyepiece of the binocular. There, on the platform, out of a cabin-like affair, walked—a man! An Earth-man, too, no doubt about it. A wizened, shrivelled creature, with straggly white hair, and deep furrowed cheeks. But the eyes—they were burning coals, aflame with relentless cruelty. Once they lifted up in the direction of the onrushing space ship and the hearts of the watchers skipped a beat. Evidently they were too far away to be visible, for the evil eyes turned indifferently away, and the Emperor busied himself about his apparatus.

Joe turned an awed look on Al. "Gosh, but you hit the nail on the head, all right. If I weren't with you all the time, I'd think you had sneaked a look at this bird before you concocted your deductions."

"Just a lucky guess," Al decried modestly. "But let me tell you something. Just because this bird is a human being just like ourselves, doesn't mean that we're not in for the fight of our lives. He looks puny enough, but he's possessed of undreamt-of powers. I'm very much afraid our weapons will prove no match for those which he commands."

"Well, a man can die but once," Joe responded philosophically.

Slower and slower drifted the space ship.

And now, here and there in the weird blue light, dark specks appeared, floating silently in that immensity. At first they thought them worlds—tiny... far off... But when the telescope was focussed on the black objects, they proved to be elongated cylinders, the cylinders in which the tribute slaves were being carried to the Emperor's domain. Nearer and nearer they plunged, irresistibly drawn to the great quartz sphere.

One came rushing by, then on beyond in headlong plunge. Straight into the effulgent radiance it dived, then, suddenly, a section of the quartz shell swung open, the cylinder sped in, the section slid simultaneously back into position.

With bated breath, the daring adventurers waited to see what would happen next.

The cylinder floated directly to the platform, came to a quivering halt against a huge plate, evidently a powerful magnet. The old man swiftly pressed a button. The head of the cylinder opened on a hinge. A nozzle directly opposite, sprayed a liquid into the interior.

"Chloroform, or something like it," hazarded Joe.

Then a mechanical arm reached in, pulled out, one by one, six denizens of some world of this universe, akin in general structure to the Prostaks.

Gloatingly, the evil scientist surveyed the limp, unconscious forms. Then with a strength amazing in one so frail looking, he lifted a body to what seemed to be an operating table. A huge hypodermic appeared in his hand, the keen point pierced the outer tissue of the helpless unfortunate, and the contents squirted home.

Joe's eyes were glued to the telescope in horror. "Know what the old beast is doing?" he shouted excitedly to Al. "Injecting some fiendish solution into their brains to make them submissive slaves to his evil will. Come on, I can't stand watching it any longer. Let's get him before he works on the others."

"Hold your horses," Al raised his voice in warning. "We're liable to hit sudden death if you keep going off half-cocked. Let's see what happens further before we attack. Maybe we can get a line on his vulnerable points."

Again and again the ghastly operation was repeated. Then the yet unconscious creatures were replaced in the metallic cylinder, lid clamped into place. The Emperor pulled a switch, the cylinder moved swiftly off the platform, darted through an automatically opening section, and vanished into the blue empyrean.

"Headed straight for one of the slave worlds," commented Al grimly. "We'll have to get busy now. Check up on the disruptor tube, Joe."

Mounted on the outer housing of the space ship, a great tube thrust its copper nose menacingly forth. Latest product of the scientific skill of the Earth, it had done yeoman service in dissipating the clouds of wandering meteors that had disputed the passage of the spheroid through space. Would it avail now, against this super-scientist. Emperor of the Stars?

It was Joe who noticed it first. "My God, Al, we're moving fast again, and towards the sphere."

Al sprang to the instrument panel. Sure enough, they were caught in a vast attraction force, were being drawn irresistibly to the enemy. "Quick Joe, let loose the forward rockets to hold us back," while he sprang to the trigger of the disruptor tube.

In an instant the rockets let loose their fierce surge of power. The staunch ship trembled with the force of the reaction. The velocimeter needle hesitated, slid backward a trifle, then slowly, remorselessly, crept forward again into full speed ahead. The mighty attraction was overpowering their puny efforts.

Now, for the first time, as they rushed closer, the wizened Emperor looked up, saw the oncoming space ship. Al, taut at the telescope, saw the startled blaze of recognition, to be succeeded by a maniacal glare of hatred. The bloodless lips curled into a soundless screech, the man darted for a huge lever, reached it, threw it with all his might.

A blinding blue flame scorched through the firmament, straight for them. Frantically, Al swerved the ship. A cataclysmic glare, the crash of a thousand thunderbolts, a ripping, tearing sound as the blue death seared the side of the space flier. Had it not been for the sudden swerve, the fight would have been over then and there. "Now," Al shouted, and the great disruptor tube roared its electronic discharge. A section of the shell buckled and melted at the impact, but the quartz was too tremendously thick. It was not more than one quarter penetrated.

Meanwhile the death rays were darting in continuous streams about their devoted ship. The rocket tubes, the electronic projector, roared deafeningly. The air within the flier was bursting with the terrific tumult.

Another blinding flash, a shattering crash, another ray had found its mark, sheared off in its glancing flight a stout metal plate. How long could this one-sided combat continue? It was only a question of time before a death ray would hit its target squarely, and then—!

Desperately Joe worked at the controls, twisted and turned the ship in irregular zigzag dashes. Al pumped the trigger of the disruptor tube in continuous bursts. All over the face of the great transparent sphere, the quartz shattered and pitted, but still there was no break.

The eyes of the straggly haired Emperor envenomed triumphantly as he reached for another lever. Immediately the staunch ship twisted and groaned in torment. A giant force seized and crushed it, the metal plates were straining, buckling under the tremendous pressure. A few minutes, and the great steel rivets would be sheared from their holes.

White lipped, Al ceased his aimless firing. In all the hellish tumult, he forced his weary brain into activity. There was only one chance in a million. Emulate the woodpecker, he thought grimly.

Coolly, methodically, he put his plan into action. While the blue flames leaped and crashed about them, while the ship shuddered in the grip of that hellish force, he carefully trained the disruptor gun on one spot on the great quartz shell. Steadily he loosed the stream of electrons, steadily he swerved the gun with the gyrations of the ship to cover the rapidly deepening pit as the deadly discharge pecked and pecked away.

The Emperor looked up, saw the havoc. For the first time there was a gleam of fear in the hate-crazed eyes. The pressure increased, the blue death crashed and roared, but Al was not to be diverted. All his being was concentrated in breaking through that one point.

The quartz was fusing, wearing thin. The Emperor saw the danger, sprang to a new machine. Al rubbed his eyes in amazement, gave vent to a great shout of jubilation.

"By Jingo, he's licked. He's turning tail and running for it!"

"We've won, boy, we've won!" Joe beat his friend's shoulder in an ecstasy of joy.

"Not yet," came the grim reply.

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded Joe. "Aren't we here, alive, unhurt. He's had enough, hasn't he?"

"That's true enough. Better than I anticipated. But you forget what we set out to do; rid this universe of his evil tyranny. He's still alive, in full control of his forces. Unless you've had enough, I'm going after to finish him."

"By Jove, you're right! Let's go. We've got him on the run."

And so these indomitable Earth-men, not content with having successfully escaped almost inevitable doom, sent their vessel hurtling after the retreating menace. Rockets blazing, green flashing disruptor tube projecting its coruscating ray, the spheroid darted across the sky. Straight for the vast shell it plunged, straight into the fierce blue light.

But the enemy was a beaten thing, his courage was gone. He could but turn and flee, rushing across the vast stretches of space, with the Earth ship darting after him, worrying, harrying. What a spectacle it was, this cosmic flight across infinite space, the great bulk streaking its mass across the empyrean, with the baffled Emperor crouched in a frenzy of agony on the platform, gazing ever backward at his pursuer, the midge darting after, plunging, biting, harrying, slicing, ever pecking away at the doomed spot.

Did the Prostak scientists watch the transcendental spectacle in their powerful telescopes? If so, what joy there must have been in that world, what a waving of tentacles, what a shimmering procession of bright red glyphs across their strange communication disks! How that orange glowing air must have vibrated to emanations of joy and of thankfulness!

The blue light was growing dim, the victory was almost complete. At last, with startling suddenness, the end came. A final roaring electronic stream, and the last thin layer of quartz buckled and broke. A blinding burst, and the great shell smashed into a million flying sparks. All space was filled with blazing, coruscating debris. The awed earth men caught a last glimpse of the doomed Emperor, his eyes filled with unutterable horror, and then—there was blackness, blessed unrelieved blackness. The Emperor of the Stars was dead!

Joe shut off the rockets, Al released the trigger-lever of the ray. With unutterable thankfulness the two turned to one another, gripped hands in silent congratulation. Then, characteristically, the incident was closed.

"What now? In this interstellar blackness, unrelieved by any stars, what will become of us? Seems like we've hopped from a burning plane to a blazing forest." Thus Al expressed it.

"Pessimist as usual! After all we've gotten through so far my bet is that we'll get back home. Somehow I can't believe that after our miraculous escapes from the dangers that have threatened us since we found ourselves in this space, we are doomed to drift endlessly—"

Joe was interrupted by a blinding flash of white light from without, a sudden violent lurch of the craft. Both men rushed to look without, to discover what new danger threatened them.

A moment of stunned silence, the men looked at each other, then out again at—the stars! Stars, myriads of them! Softly, almost reverently, Al spoke.

"Joe, look at the stars! Do you know what they are? *The suns of our own space! There's Orion, there's Cassiopeia, there's Lyra, there's Old Sol! We're home again.*"

True enough. Dotted the blackness of interstellar space were the old familiar constellations. Billions of miles from Earth, yet the adventurers were back in known space, and fair and clear lay their route before them.

"I can't understand it," Al, ever the scientist, pondered. "Wait, I have the glimmering of an idea. You remember, we were pulled out of our course by some attraction, pulled into that other space. Now, everything in that space repelled, save only the globule of the Emperor. When we destroyed that, its attraction was gone. Apparently forces from either world can make themselves felt in the other through the point of contact. With the stronger pull of the blue horror gone, the gravitational pull of the worlds in our own space took hold of us, and brought us back!"

"By Jove, you know everything! Well, old croaker, here we are. Now get us back to old Earth pronto. I've got a hankering for a nice juicy sirloin steak, smothered in onions, and a great big schooner of beer! Then a good exciting teletalkie play, and a poker game with the bunch to wind up the evening!"



(1-1) An instrument for detecting new gravitational influences acting on the ship.

(3-2) Any one interested may find a full and complete account of the language, customs and scientific achievements of the Prostaks in the monograph by Burns & Fries in the *Interworld Geographic*, Vol. 252 page. 1063.

(3-3) Prostaks were not acquainted with the phenomena of attraction.—Burns & Fries.