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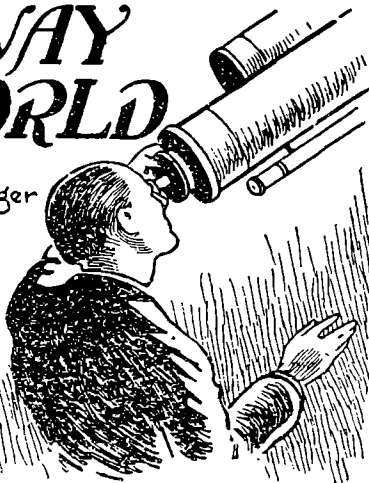
WEIRD TALES

400 Holiday Building

Indianapolis, Ind.

A RUNAWAY WORLD

by
Clare Winger
Harris



Ed Whitham

"We are plunging headlong into a mammoth sun," he said. "If it continues to draw us into it, the Earth will become a gaseous mass."

THE laboratory of Henry Shipley was a conglomeration of test-tubes, bottles, mysterious physical and chemical appliances and papers covered with indecipherable script. The man himself was in no angelic mood as he sat at his desk and surveyed the hopeless litter about him. His years may have numbered five and thirty, but young though he was, no man excelled him in his chosen profession.

"Curse that maid!" he muttered in exasperation. "If she possessed even an ordinary amount of intelligence she could tidy up this place and still leave my notes and paraphernalia intact. As it is I can't find the account of that important nitrogen experiment."

At this moment a loud knock at the door put an abrupt end to further soliloquy. In response to Ship-

ley's curt "come in," the door opened and a stranger, possibly ten years older than Shipley, entered. The newcomer surveyed the young scientist through piercing eyes of nondescript hue. The outline of mouth and chin was only faintly suggested through a Vandyke beard.

Something in the new arrival's gaze did not encourage speech, so Shipley mutely pointed to a chair, and upon perceiving that the seat was covered with papers, hastened to clear them away.

"Have I the honor of addressing Henry Shipley, authority on atomic energy?" asked the man, seating himself, apparently unmindful of the younger man's confusion.

"I am Henry Shipley, but as to being an authority—"

The stranger raised a deprecating hand, "Never mind. We can dispense

with the modesty, Mr. Shipley. I have come upon a matter of world-wide importance. Possibly you have heard of me. La Rue is my name; Leon La Rue."

Henry Shipley's eyes grew wide with astonishment.

"Indeed I am honored by the visit of so renowned a scientist," he cried with genuine enthusiasm.

"It is nothing," said La Rue. "I love my work."

"You and John Olmstead," said Shipley, "have given humanity a clearer conception of the universe about us in the past hundred years, than any others have done. Here it is now the year 2026 A. D. and we have established by radio regular communication with Mars, Venus, two of the moons of Jupiter, and recently it has been broadcast that messages are being received from outside our solar system, communications from interstellar space! Is that true?"

"It is," replied La Rue. "During the past six months my worthy colleague Jules Nichol and I have received messages (some of them not very intelligible) from two planets that revolve around one of the nearer suns. These messages have required years to reach us, although they traveled at an inconceivable rate of speed."

"How do you manage to carry on intelligent communication? Surely the languages must be very strange," said the thoroughly interested Shipley.

"We begin all intercourse through the principles of mathematics," replied the Frenchman with a smile, "for by those exact principles God's universe is controlled. Those rules never fail. You know the principles of mathematics were discovered by man, not invented by him. This, then, is the basis of our code, always, and it never fails to bring intelligent responses from other planets whose inhabitants have arrived at an un-

derstanding equal to or surpassing that of ourselves. It is not a stretch of imagination to believe that we may some day receive a message from somewhere in space, that was sent out millions of years ago, and likewise we can comprehend the possibility of messages which we are now sending into the all-pervading ether, reaching some remote world eons in the future."

"It is indeed a fascinating subject," mused Henry Shipley, "but mine has an equal attraction. While you reach out among the stars, I delve down amid the protons and electrons. And who, my dear fellow, in this day of scientific advancement, can say that they are not identical except for size? Planets revolve about their suns, electrons around their protons; the infinite, the infinitesimal! What distinguishes them?"

The older man leaned forward, a white hand clutching the cluttered desk.

"What distinguishes them, you ask?" he muttered hoarsely. "This and this alone; time, the fourth dimension!"

The two men gazed at one another in profound silence, then La Rue continued, his voice once more back to normal: "You said a moment ago that my planetary systems and your atoms were identical except for one thing—the fourth dimension. In my supra-world of infinite bigness our sun, one million times as big as this Earth, gigantic Jupiter, and all the other planets in our little system, would seem as small as an atom, a thing invisible even in the most powerful microscope. Your infra-world would be like a single atom with electrons revolving around it, compared to our solar system, sun and planets. I believe the invisible atom is another universe with its central sun and revolving planets, and there also exists a supra-universe in which our sun,

the Earth and all the planets are only an atom. But the fourth dimension!"

La Rue picked up a minute speck of dust from the table and regarded it a moment in silence, then he went on: "Who knows but that this tiny particle of matter which I hold may contain a universe in that infra-world, and that during our conversation eons may have passed to the possible inhabitants of the planets therein? So we come to the fact that time is the fourth dimension. Let me read you what a scientist of an earlier day has written, a man who was so far ahead of his time that he was wholly unappreciated:

"If you lived on a planet infinitesimally small, or infinitely big, you would not know the difference. Time and space are, after all, purely relative. If at midnight tonight, all things, including ourselves and our measuring instruments, were reduced in size one thousand times, we should be left quite unaware of any such change."

"But I wish to read you a message which I received at my radio station on the Eiffel Tower at Paris."

La Rue produced a paper from a pocket and read the following radiogram from Mars:

"A most horrible catastrophe is befalling us. We are leaving the solar system! The sun grows daily smaller. Soon we shall be plunged in eternal gloom. The cold is becoming unbearable!"

When the Frenchman had finished reading he continued addressing the physicist: "A few astronomers are aware of the departure of Mars from the system, but are keeping it from the public temporarily. What do you think of this whole business, Shipley?"

"The phenomenon is quite clear," the latter replied. "Some intelligent beings in this vast cosmos or supra-universe, in which we are but a mole-

cule, have begun an experiment which is a common one in chemistry, an experiment in which one or two electrons in each atom are torn away, resulting, as you already know, in the formation of a new element. Their experiment will cause a rearrangement in our universe."

"Yes," smiled La Rue significantly, "every time we perform a similar experiment, millions of planets leave their suns in that next smaller cosmos or infra-world. But why isn't it commoner even around us?"

"There is where the time element comes in," answered his friend. "Think of the rarity of such an experiment upon a particular molecule or group of molecules, and you will plainly see why it has never happened in all the eons of time that our universe has passed through."

There was a moment's silence as both men realized their human inability to grasp even a vague conception of the idea of relativity. This silence was broken by the foreigner, who spoke in eager accents: "Will you not, my friend, return with me to Paris? And together at my radio station, we will listen to the messages from the truant Mars."

2

THE radio station of La Rue was the most interesting place Shipley had ever visited. Here were perfected instruments of television. An observer from this tower could both see and hear any place on the globe. As yet, seeing beyond our Earth had not been scientifically perfected.

La Rue had been eager to hear from his assistant any further messages from Mars. These could have been forwarded to him when he was in the States, but he preferred to wait until his return to his beloved station. There was nothing startlingly new in any of the communications. All showed despair regarding the Martians' ability to survive, with

their rare atmosphere, the cold of outer space. As the planet retreated and was lost to view even by the most powerful telescopes, the messages grew fainter, and finally ceased altogether.

By this time alarm had spread beyond scientific circles. Every serious-minded being upon the globe sought for a plausible explanation of the phenomenon.

"Now is the time for your revelation," urged La Rue. "Tell the world what you told me."

But the world at large did not approve of Henry Shipley's theory. People did not arrive at any unanimous decision. The opinion was prevalent that Mars had become so wicked and had come so near to fathoming the Creator's secrets, that it was banished into outer darkness as a punishment.

"Its fate should," they said, "prove a warning to Earth."

The scientists smiled at this interpretation. As a body of enlightened and religious men they knew that God does not object to His Truth being known, that only by a knowledge of the Truth can we become fully conscious of His will concerning us.

The frivolous, pleasure-seeking, self-centered world soon forget the fate of the ruddy planet, and then—but that is my story!

3

IT WAS five months to the day after the radios had first broadcast the startling news that Mars was no longer revolving around the sun, that I, James Griffin, sat at breakfast with my wife and two children, Eleanor and Jimmy, Jr. I am not and never have been an astronomical man. Mundane affairs have always kept me too busy for star-gazing, so it is not to be wondered at that the news of Mars' departure did not deeply con-

cern me. But the whole affair was, much to my chagrin, indirectly the cause of a dreadful blunder at the office.

"Mars was closer to the sun than we are," I had remarked one day to Zutell, my assistant at the office, "but I'll bet the old war-planet is getting pretty well cooled off by now."

Zutell looked at me with a peculiar expression which I haven't forgotten to this day.

more remote from the sun than Earth?" he ejaculated. "Why, man alive, didn't you know Mars' orbit is more remote from the sun than ours?"

His manner was extraordinarily convincing, and inwardly I was mortified at my ignorance.

"It is not!" I declared stubbornly, then added weakly, "Anyhow, what difference does it make?"

His glance of amused condescension stung my pride, and from that time on his already too sufficient self-confidence increased. In his presence I seemed to be suffering from an inferiority complex. I laid the entire blame for my loss of self-confidence upon the truant Mars, and secretly wished the ruddy planet all kinds of bad luck.

But to return to the breakfast table. My wife, Vera, poured me a second cup of coffee and remarked sweetly, "The Zutells are coming over this morning, since it is a holiday, dear, to listen to the radio and see in the new televisio. You know President Bedford is to address the nation from the newly completed capitol building, which will be seen for the first time in the televisio. If you like, I'll ask the Mardens, too. You seem to like them so much."

"Hang it all," I said irritably, "can't you leave the Zutells out of it? Ed's forever rubbing in something about Jupiter or Venus, now

that Mars is gone. He's an insufferable bore!"

"Why, Jim," cried Vera, half laughing, "as sure as fate I do believe you're jealous, just because——"

"Jealous!" I burst out. "Jealous of him? Why, I can show him cards and spades——"

"I know you can. That's just it," laughed Vera; "that's just why it's so funny to have you care because you didn't know about Mars. It's much more important that you know more about cost-accounting than Ed does."

Vera was right, as usual, and I rewarded her with a kiss just as Junior screamed that Archie Zutell was coming across the lawn to play with him and Eleanor.

"Well, you kids clear out of here," I said, "and play outside if we grown-ups are expected to see anything of the president and hear his address, and Jimmy, don't let Archie put anything over on you. Stick up for your rights."

I imagined Vera smiled a little indulgently and I didn't like it.

"Well, at any rate," I said, "I do like young Marden and his bride. There's a fellow that really is an astronomer, but he never shoots off his mouth about it in inappropriate places."

Truth was, Marden held a high college degree in astronomy and taught the subject in our local college. Just across the street from our residence, which faced the beautiful campus, stood the observatory on a picturesque elevation. Many summer evenings since my deplorable error in regard to Mars I had visited the observatory with Oscar Marden and learned much that was interesting about the starry host.

THE breakfast dishes cleared away, Vera and I seated ourselves at our new televisio that worked in combination with the radio. It was the

envy of the neighborhood, there being but three others in the entire town that could compare with it. There was yet half an hour before the president's address was scheduled to commence. We turned on the electricity. Vice-president Ellsworth was speaking. We gazed into the great oval mirror and saw that he was in the private office of his own residence. A door opened behind him and a tall man entered the room, lifted his hand in dignified salutation, and smiled at his unseen spectators. Then in clear resonant tones he began addressing his invisible audience in a preliminary talk preceding the one to be delivered from the new capitol steps.

At this point the Mardens and Zutells arrived, and after the exchange of a few pleasantries, were comfortably seated pending the main address of the morning.

"Citizens of the Republic of the United Americas," began President Bedford.

I reached for the dials, and with a slight manipulation the man's voice was as clear as if he talked with us in the room. I turned another dial, and the lazy outlines were cleared, bringing the tall, manly form into correct perspective. Behind him rose the massive columns of the new capitol building in Central America.

The address, an exceptionally inspiring one, continued while the six of us in our Midwestern town were seeing and hearing with millions of others throughout the country, a man thousands of miles away. The day had commenced cloudy, but ere long the sun was shining with dazzling splendor. Meanwhile the president continued to speak in simple but eloquent style of the future of our great republic. So engrossed were we six, and undoubtedly millions of others upon two continents, to say nothing of the scattered radio audience throughout the world, that for some time we had failed to notice the de-

creasing light. Mrs. Zutell had been the first to make the casual remark that it was clouding up again, but a rather curt acknowledgment of her comment on the part of the rest of us had discouraged further attempts at conversation.

Not long afterward the front door burst open and the three children rushed in, making all attempts of the elders to listen to the address futile.

"Mamma, it is getting darker and colder," exclaimed Eleanor. "We want our wraps on."

"Put on the lights!" cried Jimmy, suiting the action to the word.

With the flood of light any growing apprehension that we may have felt diminished, but as we looked through the windows we noticed that outside it was dusk though the time was but 10 a. m.

Our faces looked strangely drawn and haggard, but it was the expression on young Marden's face that caught and held my attention. I believe as I review those dreadful times in my mind, that Oscar Marden knew then what ailed this old world of ours, but he said not a word at that time.

We turned our faces to the television again and were amazed at the scene which was there presented. President Bedford had ceased speaking and was engaged in earnest conversation with other men who had joined him. The growing darkness outside the capitol made it difficult to distinguish our leader's figure among the others, who in ever-growing numbers thronged the steps of the great edifice. Presently the president again turned to the invisible millions seated behind their radios and televisios, and spoke. His voice was calm, as befitted the leader of so great a nation, but it was fraught with an emotion that did not escape observing watchers and listeners.

"Tune in your instruments to Paris," said the great man. "The

noted astronomer, La Rue, has something of importance to tell us. Do this at once," he added, and his voice took on a somewhat sterner quality.

I arose somewhat shakily, and fumbled futilely with the dials.

"Put on more speed there, Griffin," said Marden.

It was the first time I had ever heard him speak in any other than a courtacious manner, and I realized he was greatly perturbed. I fumbled awhile longer until Ed Zutell spoke up.

"Can I help, Jim?" he asked.

"Only by shutting up and staying that way," I growled, at the same time giving a vicious twist to the stubborn long distance dial.

In a little while I had it: Paris, France, observatory of Leon La Rue. We all instantly recognized the bearded Frenchman of astronomical fame; he who with Henry Shipley had informed the world of the fate of Mars. He was speaking in his quick decisive way with many gesticulations.

"I repeat for the benefit of any tardy listeners that Earth is about to suffer the fate of Mars. I will take no time for any scientific explanations. You have had those in the past and many of you have scoffed at them. It is enough to tell you positively that we are leaving the sun at a terrific rate of speed and are plunging into the void of the great Unknown. What will be the end no man knows. Our fate rests in the hands of God.

"Now hear, my friends, and I hope the whole world is listening to what I say: Choose wisely for quarters where you will have a large supply of food, water and fuel (whether you use atomic energy, electricity, oil, or even the old-fashioned coal). I advise all electrical power stations to be used as stations of supply, and the men working there will be the real heroes who will save the members of their respective communities. Those

who possess atomic heat machines are indeed fortunate. There is no time for detailed directions. Go—and may your conduct be such that it will be for the future salvation of the human race in this crisis.”

The picture faded, leaving us staring with white faces at each other.

“I’ll get the children,” screamed Vera, but I caught her arm.

“You’ll do nothing of the kind. We must not any of us be separated. The children will return when they are thoroughly cold.”

My prediction was correct. The words had scarcely left my lips when the three ran into the hall crying. It was growing insufferably cold. We all realized that. We rushed about in addle-pated fashion, all talking at once, grabbing up this and that until we were acting like so many demented creatures.

Suddenly a voice, loud and stern, brought us to our senses. It was young Marden who was speaking.

“We are all acting like fools,” he cried. “With your permission I will tell you what to do if you want to live awhile longer.”

His self-control had a quieting effect upon the rest of us. He continued in lower tones, but with an undeniable air of mastery, “My observatory across the street is the place for our hibernation. It is heated by atomic energy, so there will be no danger of a fuel shortage. Ed, will you and Mrs. Zutell bring from your home in your car all the provisions you have available at once? Jim” (I rather winted at being addressed in so familiar a manner by a man younger in years than myself, but upon this occasion my superior), “you and Mrs. Griffin load your car with all your available food. I was going to add that you buy more, but an inevitable stampede at the groceries might make that inadvisable at present. My wife and I will bring all the concentrated food we have on

hand—enough for two or three years, I think, if carefully used. Kiddies,” he said to the three who stood looking from one to the other of us in uncomprehending terror, “gather together all the coats and wraps you find here in the Griffin house!”

A new respect for this man possessed me as we all set about carrying out his orders.

“You watch the children and gather together provisions,” I called to Vera. “I am going to see if I can’t get more from the store. We must have more concentrated and condensed foods than we are in the habit of keeping on hand for daily use. Such foods will furnish a maximum amount of nourishment with a minimum bulk.”

4

I OPENED the door but returned immediately for my overcoat. The breath of winter was out of doors, though it was the month of June. The streets were lighted, and in the imperfect glow I could see panicky figures flitting to and fro. I hurried toward the square, which was exactly what everyone else seemed to be doing. A man bumped my elbow. Each of us turned and regarded the other with wide eyes. I recognized old Sam McSween.

“My God, Griffin,” he cried, “what does it all mean? Ella’s been laid up for a week—no food, and I thought I’d—”

I left him to relate his woes to the next passer-by. My goal was Barnes’ Cash Grocery. There was a mob inside the store, but old man Barnes, his son and daughter and two extra clerks were serving the crowd as quickly as possible. Guy Barnes’ nasal tones reached my ears as I stood shivering in the doorway.

“No—terms are strictly cash, friends.”

"Cash!" bawled a voice near my ear. "What good will cash do you, pard, in the place we're all headed for?"

"I have cash, Guy. Gimme ten dollars worth o' canned goods and make it snappy," yelled another.

Petty thievery was rife, but no one was vested with authority to attempt to stop it. One thought actuated all: to get food, either by fair means or foul.

At length I found myself near the counter frantically waving in the air a ten-dollar bill and two ones.

"You've always let me have credit for a month or two at a time, Guy." I said coaxingly.

The old grocer shook his head in a determined manner. "Cash is the surest way to distribute this snuff fairly. The bank's open, Jim, but the mob's worse there than here, they tell me."

I shrugged my shoulders in resignation. "Give me ten dollars worth of condensed milk, meat tablets, some fruits and vegetables."

He handed me my great basket of groceries and I forced a passage through the crowd and gained the street. There were fewer people on the square than there had been an hour earlier. On their faces had settled a grim resignation that was more tragic than the first fright had been.

On the corner of Franklin and Main Streets I met little Dora Schofield, a playmate of Eleanor's. She was crying pitifully, and the hands that held her market basket were purple with the cold that grew more intense every moment.

"Where are you going, Dora?" I asked.

"Mother's ill and I am going to Barnes' grocery for her," replied the little girl.

"You can never get in there," I said. My heart was wrung at the sight of the pathetic little figure. "Put your basket down and I'll fill

it for you. Then you can hurry right back to mother."

She ceased her crying and did as I bade her. I filled her smaller basket from my own.

"Now hurry home," I cried, "and tell your mother not to let you out again."

I had a walk of five blocks before me. I hurried on with other scurrying figures through the deepening gloom. I lifted my eyes to the sky and surveyed the black vault above. It was noon, and yet it had every appearance of night. Suddenly I stopped and gazed fixedly at a heavenly body, the strangest I had ever seen. It did not seem to be a star, nor was it the moon, for it was scarcely a quarter the size of the full moon. "Can it be a comet?" I asked, half aloud.

Then with a shock I realized it was our sun, which we were leaving at an inconceivably rapid rate. The thought appalled me, and I stood for some seconds overwhelmed by the realization of what had occurred.

"I suppose Venus will give us a passing thought, as we did Mars, if she even——"

My train of thoughts came to an abrupt conclusion as I became aware of a menacing figure approaching me from Brigham Street. I tried to proceed, assuming a jaunty air, though my emotions certainly belied my mien. I had recognized Carl Hovarder, a typical town bully with whom I had had a previous unfortunate encounter when serving on a civic improvement committee.

"Drop them groceries and don't take all day to do it neither," demanded Hovarder, coming to a full stop and eyeing me pugnaciously.

"This is night, not day, Carl," I replied quietly.

"Don't you 'Carl' me!" roared the bully. "Hand over that grab, and I don't mean maybe!"

I stooped to place the basket of pro-

visions upon the walk between us, but at the same time I seized a can. As Carl bent to pick up the basket I threw the can with all the strength I possessed full at his head. He crumpled up with a groan and I snatched the precious burden and fled. When I was a block away I looked back and saw him rise and stoop uncertainly. He was picking up the can with which I had hit him. I did not begrudge him the food contained therein. That can had done me more good than it could ever possibly do Carl Hovarder.

The last lap of my journey proved the most tedious, for I was suffering with cold, and depressed at the fate of humanity, but at last I spied the observatory.

5

THE grassy knoll upon which this edifice stood had an elevation of about twenty feet and the building itself was not less than forty feet high, so that an observer at the telescope had an unobstructed view of the heavens. The lower floor was equipped as a chemical laboratory, and in its two large rooms college classes had met during the school term in chemistry and astronomy. The second story, I thought, could be used as sleeping quarters for the nine souls who felt certain the observatory would eventually be their mausoleum.

"All in?" I shouted as I ran into the building and slammed the door behind me. How welcome was the warmth that enveloped me!

"Yes, we're all in, and I suspect you are, too, judging from appearances," laughed Vera.

I looked from one to another of the little group and somehow I felt that though each tried to smile bravely, grim tragedy was stalking in our midst.

Late in the afternoon I thought of

our radio and televisio, and decided to run over to the house and get them. The streets were deserted and covered with several inches of snow, and the cold was intenser than I had ever experienced. A few yards from the observatory lay a dark object. I investigated and found it to be a dog frozen as stiff as though carved from wood, and that in a few hours! My lungs were aching now as I looked across the street at our home, and though I wanted the instruments badly I valued life more highly. I turned and retraced my steps to the observatory.

The men were disappointed that we were to be so cut off from communication with the outside world, but the essentials of life were of primary importance. We swallowed our disappointment then and many times in the future when from time to time we missed the luxuries of modern life to which we had been accustomed.

Later, while the children were being put to bed, we men ascended the steps to the telescope room where we gazed ruefully at the diminishing disk of the luminary that had given life to this old Earth of ours for millions of years.

"I suppose that's the way old Sol looked to the Martians before the days of our system's disruption," commented Ed with a side glance in my direction.

"The inhabitants of Mars saw a larger orb in their heavens than that," replied Oscar, adjusting the instrument. "We are well beyond the confines of our solar system. What do you see there, boys?"

We looked alternately through the eyepiece and beheld a bright star slightly smaller than our once glorious sun now appeared to be.

"That is Neptune," explained Marden, "the outermost planet of the system."

"So we are entering the unknown! Whither are we bound, Marden?" I

cried, suddenly overwhelmed with the awfulness of it all.

The young astronomer shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know. But we shall not be the only dead world hurtling through space! The void is full of them. I think it was Tennyson who wrote——"

"Never mind Tennyson!" I fairly shrieked. "Tell me, do you think this is the—the end?"

He nodded thoughtfully and then repeated: "Lord Tennyson wrote, 'Many a planet by many a sun may roll with the dust of a vanished race'."

"Say, this is as cheerful as a funeral service," said Zutell. "I'm going down with the women. I can hear them laughing together. They've got more grit and pluck than we have. You two old pessimists can go on with your calamity-howling. I'm going to get a few smiles yet before I look like a piece of refrigerator meat."

"Ed's right for once," I laughed. "We can't help matters this way."

6

I SHOULD gain nothing by a detailed account of the flight of Earth through interplanetary space. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks and months lost their significance to the isolated inhabitants of a world that had gone astray. Since time had always been reckoned by the movements of the Earth in relation to the sun there was no way to ascertain the correct passage of time. True, a few watches among the members of our group aided in determining approximately the passage of time in accordance with the old standards to which we had been accustomed. How we missed the light of day, no being can imagine who has never experienced what we lived through.

"Is the moon still with us?" I asked one time of Marden.

"I can not ascertain definitely,"

he replied. "With no sunlight to reflect to Earth from its surface, it has eluded my observation so far, but I have imagined a number of times that a dark object passes periodically between us and the stars. I shall soon have my observations checked up, however. How I do miss radio communication, for doubtless such questions are being discussed over the air pro and con! We are still turning on our axis, but once in every twenty-seven hours instead of twenty-four. I don't understand it!"

Oscar spent virtually all his time in the observatory. He did not always reward the rest of us with his discoveries there, as he was naturally taciturn. When he spoke it was usually because he had something really worth while to tell us.

"You remember I told you that the Earth continued to rotate, though slowly, on its axis even though it no longer revolved around the sun," he said on the day we completed approximately five months of our interstellar wandering. "I also told you that should such a calamity befall the Earth as its failing to rotate, the waters would pile up and cover the continents. I have not told you before, but I have calculated that the Earth is gradually ceasing to rotate. However, we need not fear the oceans, for they are solid ice. I may also add that with this decrease in our rate of rotation there is a great acceleration in our onward flight. In less than a month we shall be plunging straight forward at many times our present rate of speed."

It was as Oscar Marden had predicted, and in a few weeks the positions of the heavenly bodies showed that Earth was hurtling straight onward at the speed of light. At the end of two years our provisions were running very low in spite of the scanty rations which we had allowed. The telescope had become our only solace for lonely hours, and through

its gigantic lens we became aware of what the future held for us. I flatter myself that I was the first to whom Oscar revealed his fearful discovery.

"Tell me what you see," he said, resigning his seat at the eyepiece to me.

"I see a very large star," I replied, "considerably larger than any near it."

He nodded. "I will tell you something that need not be mentioned to the seven below, Jim, because I can trust you to keep your head. For some weeks past I have known that we are headed for that star as straight as a die!"

I must have paled, for he glanced at me apprehensively and added, "Don't allow yourself to worry. Remember complete resignation to whatever fate is in store for us is the only way to meet natural catastrophes."

"Yes," I agreed. "Man may be the master of his own fate as regards his relation to his fellowmen, but he has no hand in an affair like this!"

"None whatever," smiled Marden, and I thought it seemed the very nicest smile in the world, except possibly Vera's.

"If we are destined to plunge headlong into this sun that lies directly in our path, and is undoubtedly what is drawing us onward, you may rest assured that human suffering will be less prolonged than if we pass this sun and continue to fathom the abysses of the eternal ether. If we were to plunge into it, the Earth would become a gaseous mass."

"Tell me," I pleaded, "is it because we are not rotating that we are threatened with this awful disaster?"

"Yes, I believe so," he answered slowly. "If we had continued to rotate we might have escaped the powerful drawing force of this sun."

7

SINCE young Marden had taken me into his confidence I spent many hours of each waking period, for one could not call them days, at his side studying the star which grew steadily brighter. I believe as I look back through the years of my life that the increasing magnitude of that star was the most appalling and ominous sight I had ever beheld. Many were the times that in dreams I saw the Earth rushing into the blazing hell. I invariably awoke with a scream, and covered with perspiration. I sat, it seems, for days at a time watching it, fascinated as if under the hypnotic influence of an evil eye. Finally its presence could no longer be kept a secret from the others who saw outside the windows the brightness that increased as time went on.

Printed indelibly on my memory was our first excursion out of doors after three years of confinement. Walking warily along the deserted streets, we were reminded of the ancient cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. It was not ashes and lava that had worked the doom of hundreds of human beings; the destroyer in this case was intangible, but nevertheless potent. Many silent huddled forms were seen here and there, bringing tears to our eyes as we recognized this friend and that; but the greatest tragedies were in the homes where many whole families were discovered grouped together around whatever source of heat they had temporarily relied upon for warmth. We learned that none who had depended upon coal had survived the fridity, and in some instances starvation had wiped out entire households.

The scene which was the greatest shock to the reconnoitering party was that staged in Guy Barnes' store. The old grocer had been game to the end, and his body was found behind the counter, where he had apparently

been overcome by the intensity of the cold, during his labors for his fellowmen. The last overwhelming cold had descended so swiftly that many had been unable to reach shelter in time.

Next came the sad task of burying our dead. Prompt action was necessary, for the ever growing disk of the great sun hastened the process of decay. The simplest of ceremonies were all that could be employed by men and women struggling to return the living world to pre-catastrophic normality.

The sun grew terrible to behold, as large in diameter as our old sun. Still it seemed good to be once more in the open! The children scampered about and Ed and I had a race to the square and back. Scorch to death we might in a very short time, but it was certainly a pleasant thing to spend a few days in this solar glow which we had been denied so long.

Came a time when we could no longer be ignorant of the fact that it was growing uncomfortably warm. Finally we decided to do as everyone else was doing; pack up our earthly possessions and move to a part of the Earth's surface where the heat was not so direct.

Ed came over, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"You folks about ready?" he queried. "We're all packed up. The Mardens are going in our car."

I walked to the door and gazed across the seared landscape toward the mammoth fiery orb. Suddenly I gave a startled cry. The new sun was not in its accustomed place in the heavens. It was several degrees lower down, and to the east!

"Look!" I cried, pointing with trembling finger. "My God—do you see!"

I think Ed concluded I had gone insane, but he followed the direction of my gaze.

"Jim, old fellow, you're right," he

ejaculated, "as sure as Mars was farther from the sun than we were, that sun is setting, which means——"

"That we are rotating on our axis and probably revolving around the new sun," I finished triumphantly. "But we are turning from east to west instead of from west to east as formerly. If the whole world wasn't temperate nowadays I should think I had been imbibing some of the poisonous drink of our ancestors!"

8

THAT evening the townspeople who had not already migrated to cooler regions, held a jubilee in Central Park Square. The principal speaker of the evening was Oscar Marden, who explained to the people what capers our planet had been cutting during the past three years. After his address I noticed that he kept gazing skyward as if unable to bring his attention to Earth.

"Say, will you come to the observatory with me now?" he asked as I was talking to a group of friends shortly afterward.

"I'll be right along," I replied.

Scarcely half a block away we saw Ed Zutell going in the general direction of home.

"Do we want him?" I asked, not a little annoyed. "Can't we beat it up an alley? I'd like this conference alone, for I know by your manner you have something important to tell me."

"In the last part of what you say you are right," responded Marden, "but in the first part, wrong. I do want Ed, for I have something to show him, too."

When the three of us were again in the familiar setting of the past three years, Marden gazed for quite some time at the heavens through the great instrument. Finally he turned

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A Runaway World

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to us with a wry smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes.

"Just take a peep, boys, and tell me what you see." He strove in vain to conceal his amusement.

We both agreed that we saw a rather reddish star.

"That 'reddish star,'" said Oscar, impressively, "is our old friend Mars, and he is revolving in an orbit between us and the sun!"

Ed and I looked at each other speechlessly for some seconds; then without a word Ed dropped on his knees before me in something of the fashion of an Arab bowing toward Mecca.

"What's the big idea?" I asked, not a little frightened, for I wondered if the confinement of the years had crazed him.

Oscar was laughing so that he had to hold on to the telescope for support, so I concluded there was nothing very radically amiss in the situation.

"I am worshipping a god," said Ed, "for so I would call anyone who can move the planets about so that they line up in accordance with his conceptions of the way they ought to do."

"I'd like to take the credit," I laughed, then more seriously, "but a higher authority than mine has charge of the movements of the planets."

"Well, it certainly is uncanny how you have your way in everything," grumbled Ed.

9

THREE is little more to tell. The world soon adjusted itself to its new environment. People became accustomed to seeing the sun rise in the West and set in the East.

Verz was ineffably delighted with the new system of time which was necessitated by the increased orbit of

the Earth. Inasmuch as it now required a trifle over two years for our planet to make a journey once around the new sun, Vera figured that she was less than half her former age, and this new method of figuring, I may add, others of her sex were not slow to adopt.

The huge sun rendered the Earth habitable clear to the poles, and strange to say, it caused very little increase of heat in the tropics. Astronomers proved that, though a big sun, it was not as hot a one, for it was in the later stages of the cooling-off process to which all suns eventually come. Two planets had already been journeying around the giant sun before the advent of Mars and Earth, and what they thought of the intrusion of the two strange worlds was before long made evident through radio communication.

To the astronomers of this new era the welkin presented a fascinating opportunity for studying new neighbors in space.

And thus the chemical experiment of the superpeople of that vaster cosmos was finished.