

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 849 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

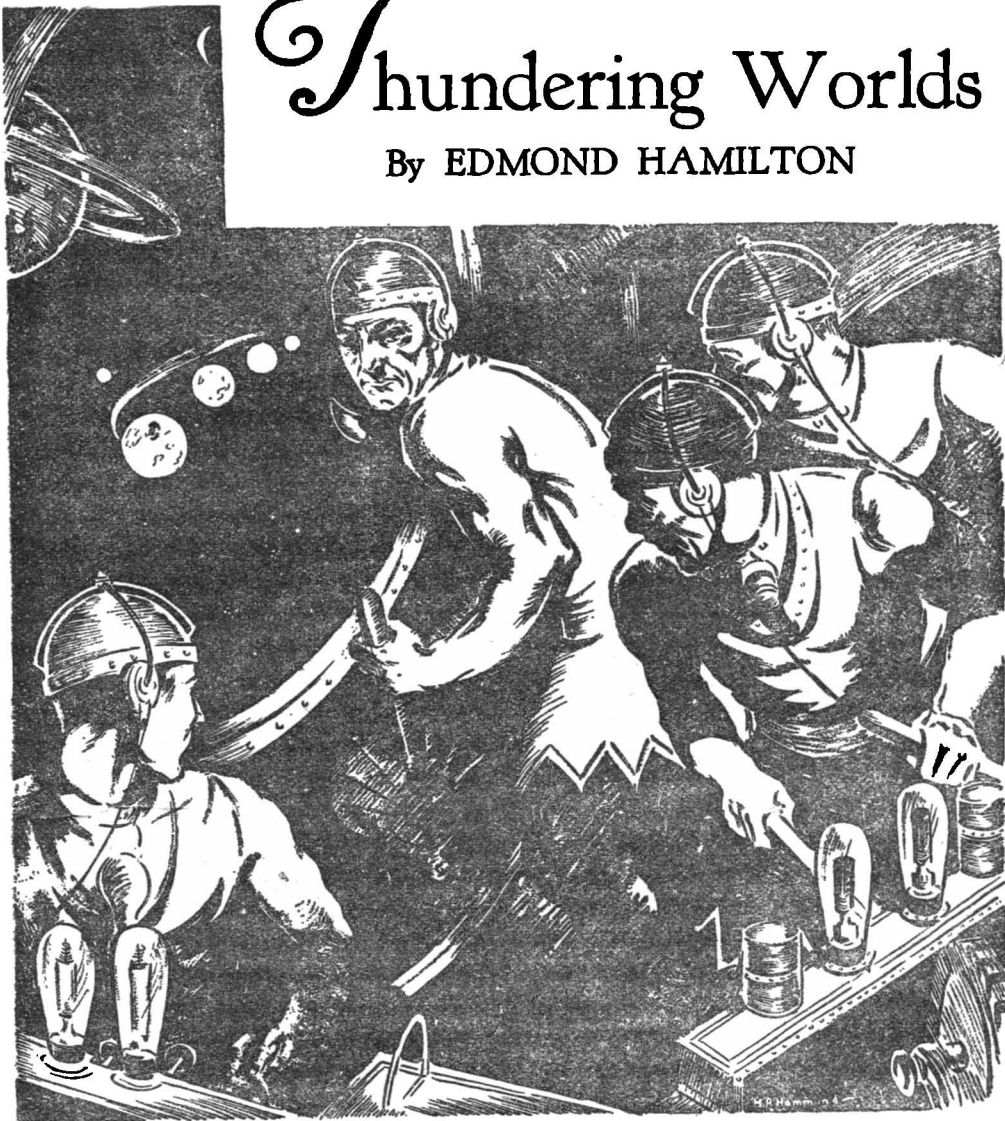
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Thundering Worlds

By EDMOND HAMILTON



"He felt the awful responsibility of his position, the power to guide the whole world through space."

A colossal thrill-tale of the distant future, when our Earth and the other planets leave the dying sun on a stupendous voyage to distant stars in search of light and heat

STANDING with Hurg of Venus at the window, I pointed up at a number of dark, long shapes sinking out of the gray sky. "There come our fellow Council-members," I said.

Hurg nodded. "Yes, Lonnat—that first ship looks like that of Tolarg of

Pluto, and the next two are those of Murdat of Uranus and Zintnor of Mars."

"And the last one is that of Runnal of Earth," I added. "Well, the solar system's peoples will soon know how we of the Council decide on the plan, whether it's accepted or rejected."

"Most of them are praying it will be accepted," Hurg said. "If it were not for Wald of Jupiter and your enemy, Tolarg of Pluto, I would be sure it would be accepted, but as it is——"

He lapsed into thoughtful silence and I too was silent with my thoughts as we gazed out of the window. The panorama that stretched before us was enough to make any man think.

We were gazing across the city of dome-shaped metal buildings that completely covered the planet Mercury. Many flyers, torpedo-shaped craft propelled by atomic blasts, swarmed over the city, rising from or descending into the heatlocks at the tops of the buildings. In the snow-sheathed streets between the buildings no people at all were to be seen. Long ago Mercury had grown too cold for life in the open.

Mercury cold? Mercury, the innermost of the sun's nine planets, that had once been heated almost to furnace-temperatures by the blazing sun? That had been many ages before, though, when the sun was hot and yellow and in the full tide of its middle-life. It was not such a sun that hung in the gray heavens over Mercury now. No, the sun above us was a huge sullen blood-red disk, a darkening crimson sun which gave forth little heat and light. It was a sun that was dying!

Yes, our sun was dying! It no longer cast out a flood of heat and light on its nine planets, and the others were even icier and colder than this one of Mercury. Long ago in the past, men had journeyed out from the planet of their origin, the world Earth, to the sun's other worlds. They had colonized all the nine planets from Mercury to Pluto, until each held a great human population. Their interplanetary ships filled the ways between the worlds, and the whole system was ruled by a Council of Nine in which each

member represented the planet of which he was the head.

This stable civilization of man in the solar system had lasted for ages upon ages. It had seemed that nothing could ever threaten it. But it was threatened at last and by a most awful menace. The sun was cooling! It was changing from yellow to red, following the course that every sun follows, and as it cooled, its planets became colder and colder. Their peoples were forced to live in cities of artificially heated dome-buildings, and move about in enclosed, warmed flyers. And still the sun cooled until men saw that in the near future it would become completely dead and dark, and that life upon its worlds would then be impossible in the awful cold.

The Council of Nine considered this situation. Julud of Saturn, ranking member of the Council and as such its chairman, called on the scientists of the solar system to suggest a way to save humanity. Many plans were proposed, and finally one plan, a stupendous one, was put forward as the one way by which humanity's continued life could be assured. It was verified in every detail by the scientists. Now we of the Council were going to vote on whether or not the plan should be followed, and I, Lonnat of Mercury, meant to cast my world's vote in favor of it. So did my friend Hurg of Venus and most of the other members, but one or two of the nine were doubtful.

Hurg was looking up now at the enormous dull-red sun that swung overhead. In the gray sky around it shone the bright points of the nearer stars, now visible by day.

"We've got the one real answer to that dying sun," I said, "if all the Council's members will see it!"

"They must!" Hurg exclaimed. "In this crisis we've got to forget our indi-

vidual worlds and think only of the whole nine!"

"I fear we won't do that while Tolarg and Wald are of us," I said. "But enough—here come the others now."

They were coming down into the round, metal-walled Council chamber in which we two were. These other members of the Council were clad like Hurg and me in sleeveless tunics and knee-length shorts, each wearing on his shoulder the insignia of his planet, the arrow of Mars or square of Uranus, and so on.

JULUD of Saturn and Runnal of Earth were the first to reach our side. Julud, our chairman, was a thin, white-haired old man with a noble face. Runnal of Earth was tall and forceful, and in his gray eyes shone the audacious humor characteristic of his world's people.

"So Hurg is here before the rest of us," smiled Julud as we greeted them. "I was detained on Saturn by the final re-checking our Saturnian scientists were giving the details of the plan."

"They checked all right?" I asked, and Julud nodded.

"Yes, our scientists repeated their decision that the plan was perfectly practicable."

"So did the scientists of Earth," Runnal told us.

Zintnor of Mars and Wald of Jupiter had joined us, and the big Wald shook his head. "Our Jovian scientists say the same," he said, "but nevertheless I hesitate to risk my world on what is, after all, only a theoretical scheme."

"Why not risk it?" Zintnor asked him curtly. "All of us will be risking our planets too."

"Yes, but as representative of the largest planet——" Wald was saying ponderously, when Hurg nudged me.

"Here comes your friend, Lonnat—Tolarg of Pluto."

Tolarg strode into our group almost insolently, with Murdat of Uranus and Noll of Neptune by his side. He saw me, and his black eyes and saturnine face became mocking in expression.

"Well, Lonnat," he greeted me, "here we all are on your toy planet Mercury once more, though it seems hardly big enough to hold all nine of us."

I was about to retort when Runnal of Earth intervened. "It is hardly the size of a planet that measures its importance, Tolarg," he said calmly. "My own Earth is not large," he added proudly, "but I think no planet in the solar system has been of more importance."

"I meant no offense," said Tolarg, his mocking smile belying his words. "In fact, I really rather like Mercury—it reminds me of the satellites of our outer planets."

I controlled my temper and kept silent by an effort, though I could see Murdat of Uranus and Noll of Neptune smiling.

"It seems to me," said Julud of Saturn, "that since we are all here, the sooner we open our meeting the better."

Zintnor agreed impatiently. "I didn't come all the way in from Mars to hear these stale jests of Tolarg's," he said, and got a black look from the Plutonian in return as we took our seats.

JULUD of Saturn faced us from the dais of the chairman, a sheaf of papers in his hand. He spoke calmly to us.

"There is no need for me to rehearse what has brought us here today," he said. "We must make today the gravest decision that the human race has ever been called on to make.

"Our sun is dying. Our nine worlds' peoples are menaced by awful and increasing cold, and unless something is

done soon their inhabitants will perish. We can not hope to revive our dying sun. Its doom is already close at hand. But out in space there lie other suns, other stars, many of them young and hot with life. If our nine worlds revolved around one of those hotter, younger suns, we could look forward to new ages of life for our race.

"It has been proposed, therefore, that we cause our nine worlds to leave our dying sun and voyage across space to one of those other suns! That our nine planets be torn loose from our sun and steered out into space like nine great ships in quest of a new sun among the countless suns of the universe! That we carry out a colossal migration of worlds through the vast interstellar spaces!

"This stupendous plan to voyage out from our sun into space on our nine worlds has a sound scientific basis. Our worlds can be propelled in space under their own power just as our space-ships are. Our ships, as you know, are moved through the void by atom-blasts that fire backward and thus by their reaction hurl the ship forward. It is possible to apply this principle on a vast scale to our planets, to fit our worlds with colossal atom-blasts which will fire backward with unthinkable power and push our worlds forward in space!

"Our worlds would be so fitted with atom-blasts that they could move at will in space, could turn in any desired direction. They would become in effect vast ships, and just as a ship has its controls centered, so would our worlds' propulsion-blasts have their controls concentrated so that one man could guide each world, at will.

"The plan is that our worlds should by this means tear loose from the sun's hold and voyage out into space in a great column or chain. The worlds with moons

would take their satellites with them, of course. The nine planets would head toward the nearest sun, which is the yellow star Nugat. It would only take months to reach Nugat, as our sun is much nearer to other stars than it was in ages past.

"If Nugat proved satisfactory as a sun for our worlds, they would be guided into orbits around it. If it was not satisfactory they would go on to the next nearest suns, to Antol or Mithak or Walaz or Vira or others. They would voyage on through the starry spaces until they found a sun satisfactory to them, and when they found it they would halt there and become planets of that sun!

"During the voyage through sunless space our worlds would receive no heat or light, of course. But during that time our peoples could live in their domicities by means of artificial heat and light. And though in the intense cold of space our worlds' atmospheres would freeze, preparation to assure an artificial air-supply could be made. There would be hardships during the great voyage, but it should not prove disastrous.

"This is the plan on which we are to vote today. Every detail of it has been checked many times by the scientists of our worlds and pronounced practicable. If we decide in favor of it, work will begin at once on the fitting of our worlds with the propulsion-blasts. If we decide against it another plan will have to be found. Do any of you wish to be enlightened further on any detail of it before we make our decision?"

As Julud paused, Murdat of Uranus rose to his feet, his face anxious.

"I would like to understand more fully the procedure by which our planets will leave the sun and move through space," he said.

"I too," said Noll of Neptune. "In what order will our worlds start?"

Julud consulted the papers in his hand. "According to the plan," he said, "Pluto, our outermost world, will start first. It will be followed by Neptune, then by Uranus, and the other planets will follow in order with Mercury last. This is so that the outer planets will be gone and out of the way when the inner planets cross their orbits on the way out. It will remove all chances of collisions.

"On their way through space, the nine planets will proceed in a long column in the same order, with Pluto first and Mercury last. When they find a satisfactory sun they will take up orbits around it in relatively the same position as their present orbits around this sun."

Tolarg of Pluto rose. "Why take this little worldlet of Mercury along with us?" "We could take its people on one of the other planets and thus not have to be bothered with it."

"You can't abandon Mercury, no matter how small it is! It's as important as Pluto or any other world!" I cried.

"Lonnat is right!" Hurg of Venus seconded me. "Mercury had cities on it when Pluto was just a ball of ice!"

"That will do," Julud said peremptorily to us. "Tolarg, your suggestion is out of order. Neither Mercury nor any other world will be left behind when and if we start."

"But what about Jupiter?" Wald asked anxiously. "It is all very well for you to move your worlds, but Jupiter is bigger than all of them and will be a different matter. It'll be more risky."

Julud shook his head. "Wald, if the calculations of our scientists are followed, Jupiter can be guided through space as surely as the other worlds. You take no more risk with your world than the rest of us with ours."

There was a pause, and then Julud addressed himself to all of us. There was a tremor in his voice that he could not quite prevent.

"If no one has further questions to ask, the time has come for our decision on this proposal. The nine worlds wait to hear that decision, so now think well before you make it. If you vote against this plan, then we cling to our dying sun that our race has always known; and though with its dying, death will overtake all on our worlds, it may be that our science can spin out existence for us for a longer time than we now think.

"If you vote for the plan, you enter our worlds on a great risk; for risk there will be despite all the calculations of our scientists. You enter our worlds on a colossal adventure, the tremendous voyage of nine planets out into the starry spaces. That voyage will mean either death soon for our worlds or a new life, a new sun to warm and light them, a boundless future again open to our race. You have heard the plan—now vote against or for it!"

With the words Julud of Saturn raised his right hand, showing himself voting in favor of the plan. The hands of Hurg and Zintnor and myself shot up almost at the same moment. More slowly and thoughtfully Runnal of Earth and Noll of Neptune raised theirs.

Murdat of Uranus had his hand up now to record his world for the plan, and there remained only Tolarg of Pluto and Wald of Jupiter. And Tolarg was calmly raising his hand—only Wald was left now!

We waited tensely. One vote would defeat the plan, and from the first Jupiter had been strongest against it. Then a roar ripped from us as at last Wald slowly, gravely, raised his hand. Shouting, we were on our feet.

Julud bent forward solemnly. "We have decided," he said, "and now we have staked man and man's nine worlds irrevocably on the issue. As soon as we can make ready, then, our planets will start out into space on their mighty voyage in quest of a new sun!"

2

TOLARG of Pluto was visible in one section of my televisior screen, speaking from the control-tower on Pluto. "All ready," the Plutonian reported. "In five minutes we start."

Julud's anxious face appeared on another section of the screen. "You will be certain to start at the calculated moment, Tolarg? It is vital that our worlds move out in the calculated order."

"Do not fear," Tolarg answered confidently. Then he must have caught sight of me in a section of his own screen, for he waved mockingly to me. "Farewell, Lonnat. Don't forget to bring your baby planet after the rest of us."

He laughed and those around him laughed. I wanted to make a retort into the televisior, but restrained myself.

I stood in the circular, many-windowed room at the top of the Mercury control-tower. On each planet had been built a tower in which were concentrated the controls of the atom-blasts that would propel that planet through space. And now each one of us nine of the Council, from Tolarg out on Pluto to me here on Mercury, were ready with our scientist-assistants in our control-towers, since the time had come for the start of our planets into space.

Around me in the room were the banks of shining levers that controlled Mercury's propulsion-blasts. Also in the room were the myriad instruments necessary to guide our world in its flight through space, the great telescopic and spectroscopic instru-

ments and other astronomical equipment. Also there was a great televisior whose screen was divided into eight sections, each one of which gave me vision into the control-tower of one of the other planets.

In the various sections of it I could see Tolarg in the Pluto control-tower, his assistants standing at the controls ready to start the planet; Noll and Murdat in the towers of Neptune and Uranus, ready to follow with their worlds; Julud anxiously waiting for Tolarg's start; Wald of Jupiter waiting with troubled brow for his mighty world's take-off; Zintnor of Mars and Runnal of Earth impatiently watching from their planets' towers; and Hurg smiling at me from the control-tower on Venus. By this means we could communicate freely with one another during our worlds' flight, as well as using our ships to go from one world to another in mid-flight.

In the Pluto tower, Tolarg was watching the time-dial. In minutes more Pluto would hurtle out into the void away from the sun, starting the great migration of our nine worlds. A tenseness was upon us all as we watched for the moment, a tenseness born of the suspense of the past months of preparations. For the months that had passed since we of the Council of Nine had voted to follow the great plan, had been ones of feverish preparation.

Every world had to be fitted with the huge atom-blasts that would propel it in space, and also had to be made ready so that its people could live during the voyage through the sunless void. The greatest labor had been the fitting of the atom-blasts. This was a task so titanic that only by devoting almost all the energies of our planets' peoples to it were we able to complete it in so short a time.

Huge pits miles across and many miles deep were sunk in each planet at three

points around its equator. These pits were metal-lined and thus were in fact stupendous tubes sunk in the planet. At the bottom of them was the apparatus for exploding the matter there, blowing its atoms into streams of electrons and protons that shot out of the huge tubes with inconceivable force. This tremendous force would be enough to propel the planet in the opposite direction. By using the suitable one of the three huge blasts, the world could be propelled in any desired course.

It was necessary, of course, that each planet should have its propulsion-blasts controlled from a single spot. So the control-towers had been built, one on each of the nine worlds, and fitted with all necessary aids for the navigation of our worlds on their tremendous voyage. Each one of us was to have charge of his planet's guidance, with a corps of scientists to assist him and relieve him at the controls and chart the path to be followed through space.

Besides these preparations it was needful to make the nine worlds ready so that their peoples could exist during the voyage. This was a simpler task, for though it would be terrible cold and dark on the worlds once we had launched out from our sun, our peoples were already more or less used to cold and absence of light. In their cities of heated domes they could exist, and arrangements had been made to supply air to the buildings, as it was foreseen that the cold would be so intense that our worlds' atmospheres would freeze.

So now all these preparations were finished and the great moment had come when Pluto, first of our nine planets, was to start forth on this awful voyage.

I LOOKED from the televisor to the time-dial beside it, which almost indicated the prearranged time at which Pluto was

to start. In the televisor I could see Hurg and all the others watching intently.

Then one of the scientists in the Pluto control-tower spoke a single word to Tolarg, at the controls. "Time!"

Tolarg rapidly depressed six levers, and the tower on Pluto quivered violently. "We're off!" he exclaimed.

I turned quickly to one of the telescopes in my own tower, gazed through it at Pluto. The planet was a little brown ball out there at the solar system's edge. And now from that little ball tiny jets of fire seemed darting backward in steady succession. They were the great atom-blasts of Pluto, firing regularly backward. And as they fired, the little planet was beginning slowly to leave its accustomed orbit and move away from the sun, out into the great void where burned the hosts of distant stars.

I was awed despite myself. There was something so tremendous about this starting out of the planet into space under its own power. Watching in the telescope I could see it moving farther and farther off its orbit, booming out into the infinite with every atom-blast at its rear firing as Tolarg calmly steered it on. And far out there in space shone the yellow star that was to be our first goal, the yellow sun Nugat. Faster and faster Pluto was moving toward it and was already well out from our sun and its other eight worlds.

"Neptune's next," came Julud's voice from the televisor. "All ready, Noll?"

"We are ready to go in two minutes," Noll of Neptune answered quietly.

Julud nodded. "Be sure not to follow Pluto too closely, so there'll be no danger of your moon colliding with it."

Noll nodded quietly. The rest of us watched, and then as the two minutes passed I went again to the telescope.

When the moment had come, I saw the little fire-jets shooting back from

Neptune's little green sphere also. And rapidly at mounting speed Neptune too was moving out from its orbit, heading after Pluto. As I watched, I saw that Neptune's moon, Triton, was moving out with its parent-planet, still circling around it as it sailed out from its orbit.

This was a relief to all of us, especially to those of us whose planets had moons, for there had been a little doubt as to whether the satellites would follow their worlds. But Triton clung to Neptune as it launched outward after Pluto. And now Pluto and Neptune, one behind the other, were moving out toward the distant yellow star of Nugat.

It was Uranus' turn next. Murdat waited until Pluto and Neptune were even farther out before he started his planet after them. Uranus was a splendid sight as it started, a pale-green planet with a family of four moons that continued to circle it steadily as it moved away. Murdat headed his world directly after Neptune, so that the chain of two worlds had by now become one of three.

Then it was the turn of Saturn, the planet of our chairman Julud. It had been necessary to fit the huge atom-blasts on Saturn in special positions because of that planet's vast rings. Now when Julud drove his planet out after the other three, double-blasts of fire shot back from it. Only slowly did this, the second largest of the sun's worlds, get under way. Saturn was a magnificent sight as with its encircling rings and ten thronging moons it thundered out after Pluto and Neptune and Uranus.

Four planets were now well under way, moving in a chain through the void with Pluto first and Saturn last. And now had come the most risky moment of the entire start, the start of Jupiter. Jupiter, the monarch of the solar system, was so colossal in size that it required immense

forces to move it at all, and for that reason its people had always been nervous about this mighty undertaking.

We watched tensely as Wald started his giant world. Terrific streams of fire shot back from the planet's mighty mass as its atom-blasts were turned on. It seemed not to change position at all. Not so easily was great Jupiter to be torn from the sun! Again and again the blasts fired, until at last, slowly and ponderously, the great world and its nine moons began veering outward from its orbit.

The blasts continued to fire, time after time, until Jupiter was moving out at a speed equal to the other four worlds that had started, and following them in space. We all breathed more easily at that. For the four planets that were left were comparatively small and there should be no trouble in getting them under way now that the huger outer planets had started.

ZINTNOR's world, Mars, was next. The fiery Martian chafed impatiently until it was time to start, and then his red world and its two tiny moons shot outward with tremendous speed as he opened his back-blasts with all their power. The little red ball of Mars sped out into space after Jupiter's mighty white globe, looking like a belated satellite trying to catch up with its parent-planet, a comparison that would have aroused Zintnor's wrath.

Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter and Mars under way—and Earth next. Already Runnal of Earth was starting his planet after the others. And now, as his world and its single moon started out after Mars and the others, something tightened in the throats of all of us who watched; something strange that we felt at seeing Earth leaving the sun.

Earth, the parent-world of our human race, had always had a special place in our

hearts. Even those of us whose ancestors for a thousand generations back have been born on Pluto or Saturn or one of the other worlds, feel somehow when we visit Earth for the first time that we are getting home. The gray planet with its beautiful moon is more than just one of the nine worlds, and so it was with more than ordinary emotion that we now watched it go.

Now only Venus and my own world of Mercury were left, and the time was at hand for Venus to start.

"Good-bye, Lonnat," said Hurg from the televisior-screen. "Here goes my world too!"

"And then mine the last," I said smilingly. "The tail end of the procession, so to speak."

"Well, that's the proper place for the littlest world, isn't it?" Hurg grinned.

In the telescope then I saw the great back-blasts of fire from Hurg's cloudy planet. Venus too was starting. I watched as it sped on after the others, out away from the sun after the great chain of worlds that was now marching steadily into the void, with Pluto in the lead. Venus took its place at the end of that chain, and moved on with it.

And now Mercury alone was left of all the sun's worlds. Little Mercury, held close to the dying sun as though it were loth to let this, the last of its children, leave it. As I walked to the great bank of control-levers, ready to send my planet out after the others, I felt strangely lonely, oppressed.

I held the levers in my hand as the time-dial's hands crept onward. About me my assistants were ready at other levers and instruments. The awful responsibility of my position, the power that was mine to guide a whole world through space at will, weighed upon me. With an effort I remained calm. Then as the

time-dial indicated the moment, I threw down the levers.

Instantly the control-tower, the whole planet, was shaken by a shuddering convulsion and there came to our ears the tremendous roar of the atom-blasts firing back from our world. The starry heavens seemed to jerk and quiver as Mercury lurched forward under the impetus of the back-blasts. And as it moved faster I threw down other levers, fired the side-blasts that drove us outward from our orbit. Tensely I watched, firing blast after blast as I guided Mercury out after the chain of other worlds.

Mercury lurched and swayed as I steered the planet outward. Ahead moved the column of the eight other planets, eight mighty worlds thundering through the void toward the distant yellow star, with Pluto leading and the other worlds with their families of moons solemnly following. And as Mercury moved after them with increasing speed, the light faded on its surface and its atmosphere began to freeze and fall in great flakes. I looked back at the sun we were leaving.

There it spun, the crimson sun, old, waning, dying. Planetless now, the nine worlds that long ago had been born from it leaving it. And as Mercury left it last of all, the significance of it struck home to my heart. We were leaving the sun where mankind and its world had come into existence, the sun that for millions of generations had been *the* sun, the sun beneath which man had grown great.

I flung back my hand wordlessly toward that diminishing, dying star. I wanted to speak to it as though to a dying, conscious parent whom we were leaving, but I could only make that gesture. And in that gesture, as my world sped out after the other worlds into the great void with

its atmosphere freezing and falling, man bade farewell to his sun for ever.

3

JULUD of Saturn spoke to me from my televisor-screen. "Tolarg reports that Pluto is within ten billion miles of the sun Nugat, Lonnat!" he told me.

"That's good!" I exclaimed. "We won't be much longer reaching it, then."

Hurg of Venus spoke from another section of the televisor. "As for me, I don't care how soon we reach it. I'm getting pretty tired of this journey and I don't care who knows it."

Julud smiled. "We'll all be glad when it ends, I think. And if Nugat proves a satisfactory sun, as we think it will, the journey will end here. Our scientists report that this sun is a young and hot one, which promises well. They also say it has two planets and some strange radiation-lines in its spectrum."

"You're going to send ships ahead to investigate the sun before our worlds reach it, aren't you?" I asked, and Julud nodded.

"Yes, when we get a little closer a scouting force of ships will go ahead and see what the sun and its worlds are like."

He and Hurg disappeared from the televisor, and I turned from it to stare out the control-tower's window. About me in the tower were some of my scientist-assistants, who never ceased their watch over our instruments as we guided Mercury through the void after the other planets. Outside the tower stretched Mercury's surface, its countless dome-buildings now covered by a blanket of frozen air and lying in unchanging darkness relieved only by the light of the stars.

Ahead of our speeding world, against those stars, I could make out the vague light-points of the other eight worlds

whose columns we were following through space. Their formation was the same as when we had started months before, with great Pluto thundering in the van under the guidance of Tolarg. I wondered how the self-confident Plutonian liked the task of leading the nine worlds on their march through the void. Far behind us burned the red star that was the sun we had left months before.

And ahead there shone the sun toward which we were moving, the yellow star Nugat. It had grown steadily in brightness as we approached it, and now we were so near that it presented a visible disk, a small yellow sun in seeming. It gleamed now like a great yellow star of hope, for we all hoped that we could halt our journey here.

Our hopes grew in the next days as we drew even closer to Nugat. It was growing in visible size and seemed in every way suitable as a sun for our nine worlds. It had two planets of its own, but we could easily allow for them in guiding our world into orbits around it. Also the strange radiation from it mentioned by Julud continued to puzzle our scientists, but we gave little attention to it.

When we were within six billion miles of Nugat, Julud called me again on the televisor.

"You will command a scouting expedition to go ahead and explore the sun, Lonnat," he told me. "Take a hundred ships."

"Why not give me the task?" asked Tolarg from Pluto on the televisor. "I'm nearer to Nugat than Lonnat is, and it would save time."

"It is my order," Julud said calmly. "You will start at once, Lonnat."

As I turned to go I caught sight of Hurg's rueful face in another section of the televisor. "Cheer up, Hurg," I told

him. "When I get back I'll tell you all about it."

"The only reason they send you is because it doesn't matter what happens to your puny little planet," Hurg retorted, and then we both laughed.

I gave my scientist-assistants instructions on maintaining Mercury on its course during my absence. Then our hundred ships tore up from Mercury and started forward.

OUR ships could, of course, move much faster in space than our worlds were moving. So, flying ahead at top speed, we soon passed Venus, then Earth, Mars, Jupiter and all the others one by one. To save time we went close past the column of worlds, cutting in between them and their circling moons and speeding ahead until we were past Pluto and shooting ahead toward the yellow sun Nugat.

Our speed was so great that we were soon far ahead of our nine moving worlds. On we shot, until the blazing yellow disk of Nugat had become a huge sphere of golden fire in the heavens before us. We headed toward its two planets, that spun close together off to one side of the sun, and as I felt the flood of blistering heat and dazzling light that poured upon us I saw in it a wonderful sun for our worlds.

I felt also at the same time a strange tingling through all my body, one that became steadily stronger and more disconcerting, but did not pay much attention to the phenomenon at the time, so engrossed was I with our task. We were close to one of the two planets now, and were descending rapidly toward its surface, when from one of the scientists in my ship who were training their astronomical instruments upon Nugat came a cry.

"This sun is giving off radiations unlike anything our own sun ever produced!" he cried. "Do you feel anything strange?"

"A sort of tingling," I said. "What is it?"

"It's radio-active radiation—rays that crumble and disintegrate matter!" he cried. "This sun must have a great mass of gaseous radio-active matter in it and is pouring out waves that are deadly to all life!"

"But there's life on the world below us!" cried someone else. "Look—those things!"

We were still dropping low toward the planet we had been approaching and could now see its surface. It was a world of nightmare, a radio-active planet! Its whole mass shone dimly with white light, and it was evident that this radio-active world, child of a radium sun, was itself constantly giving off deadly radiation. A planet upon which no conceivable living thing could exist!

Yet there was life upon it! It was such life as we would never have deemed possible had we not seen it. The living things we saw below were things of shining matter whose bodies were glowing and disintegrating and changing even as they moved about! They were radio-active creatures of this deadly world!

We glimpsed swarms of them, moving to and fro amid buildings and streets that were themselves built of glowing, disintegrating matter. We even saw, some distance off from their weird city, the glowing waves of a great radium sea or ocean whose whole liquid mass must have been composed of radio-active elements.

Then one of my pilots cried, "Look, our ship is beginning to glow and disintegrate too! And the others!"

I stared, amazed. Our ship was glowing dimly with a waxing white light, and

small fragments were breaking from it here and there. And the other ships too were shining.

"Quick, out of here!" I shouted. "It's death for us to stay near this sun longer."

"And death for our nine worlds too if they come closer to this sun!" another cried. "We must get back to them, they must be turned aside!"

Our ships whirled upward. The tingling in our bodies had now become a wrenching that seemed tearing the atoms of our tissues apart. As we shot outward from the radio-active sun and its shining pair of worlds I thought that we were about to perish. But as we drew away from Nugat and out of the stronger zone of its deadly radiation, our ships ceased to glow and the worst of the sickness left us. We headed back at top speed toward our oncoming nine worlds.

In brief words there I reported to Julud the danger of approaching closer to the radium sun. Promptly Julud gave orders for all our worlds to turn aside from it at once so that we would pass it at a safe distance. By the time I got back to the control-tower on Mercury, Pluto was already turning aside at the head of our column and the other worlds following its lead. I shifted Mercury's course to follow them.

We headed past Nugat and toward the next nearest sun, the yellow star Antol. As we passed Nugat we all watched anxiously, but we were at a distance that kept us out of the stronger of its deadly radiations. Even so, passing it was a risky business, for its pull upon us was great. Julud and Wald in particular had an anxious time with Saturn and Jupiter and had to fire continually side-blasts toward Nugat to keep the great sun from pulling their worlds out of their course.

But at last we were all past and the devil-sun that would have destroyed all

life on our worlds was dropping behind. Antol now was our goal, and this meant that our months of voyaging through space must be repeated before we could reach that sun. And if Antol, like Nugat, proved unsatisfactory as a sun for us, we must go on from it to some of the other nearer stars, to Mithak or Walaz or Vira or other suns beyond. It was a discouraging prospect, for we had hoped that our voyage of worlds would end at Nugat.

ON AND ON in the next months, steadily forward through the starry spaces forged our travelling worlds. Nugat contracted again to a yellow star behind us, and again the sunless void was about us, again we kept ceaseless watch as we drove our worlds through the great emptiness. Still in the van led dark Pluto; still after it came the other planets one by one; still my own little world of Mercury followed last of all in this mighty voyage.

Our hopes rose once more, as after months of this tremendous journeying the yellow sun Antol grew in size and brightness ahead. Julud announced that according to our astronomers Antol was in its late youth and that it had four planets. It had in its spectrum none of the mysterious radiations we had found so deadly at Nugat, and though our astronomers said that there were some peculiarities in its physical make-up, they saw no reason why it should not be the sun we sought.

So our hopes again grew as we drew near to Antol. When within twelve billion miles of it, our scientists found that its four worlds were apparently habitable. They had found also that Antol's physical makeup was of an odd type apparently rare among suns, but repeated that the yellow sun should prove a sufficient source

of heat and light for our worlds. When within eight billion miles of it, Julud announced that on the next day he would send another scouting force ahead to investigate Antol and its worlds, as we had done at Nugat.

But that night, though night and day were the same unchanging dusk as respects light, there came a sudden alarm from Tolarg of Pluto.

"Pluto is being attacked by strange spherical ships in immense numbers!" Tolarg cried. "They outnumber us and are trying to destroy us!"

"Saturn has just been attacked also!" Julud exclaimed. "Are any other planets assailed?"

"Yes, Neptune has been descended upon by floods of spheres!" Noll cried. "They are fighting over this control-tower with our ships!"

"And Uranus too!" came Murdat's shout. "They seem to be coming from ahead."

"They must be creatures of Antol's worlds!" Julud cried. "Creatures who have come to meet us and are attacking our first four worlds!"

4

EVERY ship in the last five worlds come to our aid at once!" Julud commanded. "These creatures must be repelled before they overpower us!"

"Keep Mercury in its course after the other worlds," I cried to my scientist-assistants. "I'm going ahead with our ships."

In minutes every space-ship that we of Mercury possessed was darting up from our world and tearing ahead through space. I was in the foremost ship, and as we flew on our crews made ready the ship's weapons, atom-blasts that shot forth highly concentrated streams of

atomic force that had great range and enormous destructive power.

As our ships shot past Venus we were joined by the ships of that world, with Hurg at their head. Already the ships of Earth and Mars and Jupiter were on their way forward with Runnal and Zintnor and Wald leading them. We were all heading for the four first worlds of our moving column, Pluto and Neptune and Uranus and Saturn, since it was these that had been so suddenly and terribly attacked.

The ships of Jupiter and Mars and Earth went on to aid the first three planets, leaving the forces of Hurg and myself to succor Saturn. We tore in toward the ringed planet, over twenty thousand ships strong, and darted down to take part in the wild and awful battle that was raging all around Saturn.

The scene over Saturn's surface was appalling. Space seemed filled with darting spheres, black metal balls of greater size than any of our ships. They were raining disks of white flame upon the dome-city that covered Saturn, and as the flame-disks fell they annihilated whatever they touched. Saturnian ships were battling the black spheres above the planet, using their atomic fire-blasts against the flame-disks of the spheres.

The Saturnians were badly outnumbered and were being overwhelmed as we appeared. Without hesitation our ships dived down into the wild struggle. Hurg and his Venerian craft were a little below my own, and I saw them crash into the battle and flash their fire-blasts right and left upon the swarming spheres. Then we too were in the thick of the fight, and space about us seemed choked with hurtling spheres and ships, with atomic fire-flashes and destroying flame-disks.

As calmly as I was able, I gave orders to our craft as Mercurian, Venerian and

Saturnian ships struggled with the spheres. I had a thousand kaleidoscopic glimpses of death dealt and averted. Two spheres loosed flame-disks at us, and our ship darted between them and drove fire-blasts to either side to destroy the spheres. A Venerian ship rammed a sphere and both exploded in flame. A Saturnian recklessly attacked three spheres and was annihilated by a half-dozen flame-disks.

The battle went on. Through the windows of the darting spheres I had momentary sight now and then of the creatures attacking us, black, formless things whose bodies seemed liquid! The fight now was raging out from the surface of Saturn. We were close to Saturn's rings, those mighty belts of whirling meteors that girdled the planet. Around and between the spinning rings and the planet's ten thronging moons our mad battle with the invaders went on. Ships and spheres blundered into death in the rings or crashed against the moons.

The scene was stupendous: the nine great worlds still thundering on in a column toward the glaring sun of Antol ahead; the creatures that had come from that sun's worlds attacking us in their spheres with the flame-disks; and we of three worlds struggling with them there amid the whirling rings and moons of Saturn, with death above and death below and the cold stars watching our mad fight.

The Antolians gave back! Their spheres had been halved in number by our fierce attack and they fled abruptly in the direction of Uranus.

"On to Uranus and Neptune and Pluto!" came Julud's cry from the televisors. "We must repel them there too!"

Our ships rushed on toward Uranus, the next world in the column. A fight still was raging around its moons, but as we attacked the Antolians there they fled ahead.

Now all our ships, with those of Uranus too, sped on toward Neptune and Pluto. We found Neptune already deserted by the invaders, but when we reached Pluto found that world in bad straits. Hosts of the spheres were overwhelming and destroying the Plutonian ships.

"Here's our chance to show Tolarg how we of the inner planets can fight!" came Hurg's yell from my televisor as we shot into the battle.

IF THE battle at Saturn had been fierce, the one at Pluto was terrific. The Antolians were in far greater numbers and seemed fiercely resolved to capture at least this one planet. They had concentrated their forces there now, and the fight that followed our reaching them was of the maddest kind.

Ships of every one of our nine worlds, Venerians and Mercurians and Earthmen, Jovians and Saturnians, ships with the square of Uranus or the oval of Neptune or the black bar of Pluto on them, dashed against the Antolian spheres in that tremendous battle. It seemed impossible that any ship could continue to exist in that hell of flying flame-disks and dancing atom-blasts. Wrecked spheres and ships rained in ruin upon the surface of Pluto.

But the Antolians could not stand the terrific onslaught we men of the nine worlds made upon them. They gave back into space from Pluto, then turned and dashed back toward their sun. From those in our ships came wild cheers as we saw them flee toward Antol. Then while our fleets continued to guard our advancing worlds, we nine of the council descended at Julud's command to meet in the Pluto control-tower.

"That attack nearly captured four of our worlds," Julud exclaimed. "They

would have done so had it not been for the aid of the inner planets."

"Yes, they of Mercury and Venus and the rest came in time," Tolarg conceded. "But why did these Antolians attack us? Why did they want to capture those four planets?"

"Some of the Antolians were captured," Runnal said. "We could question one telepathically and find out their reason."

"We'll do it," Julud said. "Have one of them brought in."

ONE of the Antolian prisoners was soon brought before us. The creature was utterly grotesque-looking. It was like the others we had glimpsed, a liquid creature whose body was simply a pool of thick, viscous black liquid. In this floated two eyes, and it could extend arms and limbs at will from its viscous mass. It was utterly unlike anything we had ever seen.

"It looks intelligent enough to receive and project thought," Julud said.

He projected a thought at the thing. "You are one of the inhabitants of the four worlds of Antol—the yellow sun ahead?"

"Yes," came the thing's thought-answer. "Our race is a mighty one and covers with its numbers all of those four worlds."

"Why did you attack our planets?"

"We saw them coming through space and wished to capture four of them, so that we could leave our sun in them," the Antolian answered.

"Leave your sun?" Julud repeated. "Why do you want to do that? Doesn't Antol give your worlds sufficient warmth and light?"

"It does," the Antolian replied, "but it is about to become a nova."

Cries burst from us. Antol about to

become a nova! That meant that the sun would explode, expanding out to far greater size with inconceivable speed and destroying planets or anything else near to it!

"So that's why you want to leave it?" Hurg asked.

"Yes, for when it becomes a nova, which it will do very soon, it will destroy our worlds. We thought if we captured four of your travelling worlds we could move on them to another sun."

Julud looked at us. "We must not stop at Antol but go on toward another sun, then," he said.

It was so decided and we returned to our own planets. Then Pluto veered aside and after it our other planets until all were veering away from Antol. We had decided to head toward the next nearest sun, the orange sun Mithak, which lay not a great distance from Antol. As we drew away from Antol we expected another attack by the Antolians, but it did not come. We headed steadily on toward Mithak.

Looking back, we could see from disturbances in its physical appearance that the sun Antol was very near the point of explosion into a nova. Then not long after we left it, the explosion came. From a large yellow star behind us, Antol expanded suddenly into a terrific, dazzling sphere of light! It had burst into a sun hundreds of times larger than it had formerly been!

I looked to see the little light-flashes that would mark the destruction of its four planets in its fires, but saw nothing of the sort. Then I suddenly looked more intently. There against the fiery brilliance of Antol's fiery new sphere were four dark little points, coming on in a little column after us! They were the four worlds of Antol!

"The four Antolian worlds!" I cried

into the televisior. "They're coming after us—they escaped their sun's explosion!"

"Impossible!" Julud cried. "How could they move their worlds away from their sun?"

"In the same way we moved our worlds!" I cried. "They've imitated us and fitted atom-blasts on their worlds—they're following us and will dispute possession with our worlds of any sun we reach!"

5

"**M**ITHAK a disappointment too, now that we've reached it! And the four Antolian worlds still following us! How long are our planets to continue this quest?"

It was Wald of Jupiter speaking in my televisior, and I heard Murdat answer from Uranus. "We can't go on indefinitely like this," he said. "Our peoples can't exist much longer on this terrible journey."

"I feared it would be so," said Wald. "Nugat unsuitable, Antol unsuitable, and now Mithak unsuitable—one sun after another we've reached and still we have to go on. Are our worlds to go on vainly searching space for a sun for themselves until all life on them is dead? Better to have stayed at our old sun, where at least we could have lived a little longer."

"Why this discouragement?" I demanded. "It's true that Mithak is impossible as a sun for us, but there are still Walaz and Vira beyond. One of them may be the sun we seek!"

"I say the same, Lonnat!" exclaimed Hurg of Venus.

But there came Tolarg's mocking voice from Pluto. "It's all right for you, Lonnat, your planet doesn't amount to much if it is lost."

"And what about those four Antolian worlds following us?" Murdat asked. "If

we do find a suitable sun they'll try to take it from us and will make terrible enemies."

Julud intervened. "As to the Antolian worlds, they may stop at another sun than the one we settle at, and in any case we'll take things one at a time. It is true that Mithak is impossible as a sun for us, but there still lie Walaz and Vira beyond. One of them may be the sun we seek."

We stared silently for a time toward the sun Mithak. Since leaving Antol our nine worlds had marched steadily on toward Mithak, hoping that the orange sun would prove satisfactory and that our great voyage would end at it. But our hope had ended now that we had almost reached Mithak. For we found that it was surrounded by numberless vast belts and zones of whirling meteors, the only satellites the sun had, a tremendous storm of stone ceaselessly circling it.

To venture our nine worlds into that terrific zone of meteors would be to destroy them almost at once, to turn them into semi-molten condition by the impact of the thousands of great meteoric masses that would strike them in minutes. No, Mithak was not the sun at which our weary worlds could rest. We must go on, to Walaz or Vira. And so worn by the hardships of the voyage through sunless space on our frozen worlds were our peoples that we might not even be able to reach those suns.

Nevertheless, go on we must, as it was impossible to turn back. So at Julud's order, Tolarg turned Pluto away from Mithak and toward Walaz. Walaz was a yellowish-red sun that shone in the heavens as a variable star, regularly increasing and decreasing its brilliance. One by one we turned our worlds after Pluto until all our chain was moving in the direction of Walaz.

I looked back into space along the way,

we had come. There I could see by means of our telescopes the four little light-points that were the four worlds of the Antolians, marching on after us, following us. They seemed moving even faster than our worlds, no doubt because they had been fitted with more atom-blasts than ours. Somberly I looked back at them. Even if we did find a sun for our nine worlds, those pursuing planets would seek to share it with us, and we had seen enough of the liquid-bodied Antolians to know that they would make terrible foes and might be able to wrest our own worlds from us.

So our nine worlds moved on toward Walaz, with the Antolians' planets behind and our fate ahead. On a day when we had almost reached Walaz, we looked back and saw that by then the four Antolian worlds had reached Mithak. We watched to see if they would stop at that sun, but they came on past it and after us. No more than we would they destroy their worlds in that cosmic stone-storm around Mithak.

Walaz loomed ahead of us. And almost the last of our resolution fled when we saw its nature. It was a variable star; that we had known. We saw now the reason. Walaz had a dark companion, a dead star as large as itself. The dead star and the yellow-red sun revolved around each other and so the dark one regularly eclipsed the bright one. It meant that this sun was no haven for our planets either. For if our planets circled these two companions, the dark one would constantly be cutting off by its regular eclipses the warmth and light of the bright one. We must go on still farther.

JULUD again gave the order and our planets turned from Walaz and headed toward Vira. Vira, the blue-white sun that shone brightly in the distance, was

now our last hope. For beyond it there were no suns for a vast distance. If for any reason Vira was unsuitable, then we were doomed. It might even be that our peoples could not continue existence until Vira was reached, so numbed and weakened were they by the intense cold and darkness of sunless space.

We drove our planets forward toward Vira at the highest possible speed. Forgotten now were the Antolian worlds pursuing us, forgotten everything but the blue-white sun ahead. Our worlds lurched and bucked as we fired blast after blast, urged them on at greater and greater speed. What we found Vira to be would mean life or death for us, and hungrily, tensely, we watched the sun as we sped on toward it.

Behind us at speed even greater than ours, the four Antolian worlds came steadily on our track. They were now drawing near to the sun Walaz. Walaz should be suitable, we thought, for the four Antolian worlds and they would stop there. In any case, we were not thinking now of them but of the sun ahead. Steadily now we were drawing nearer to Vira.

What a cosmic trail we had blazed across the void in our stupendous voyage! Since leaving our own sun, our worlds had touched at four others: at the deadly radio-active sun of Nugat; at Antol, on the brink of explosion, where we had fought its creatures; at Mithak with its awful zones of whirling meteors; and at Walaz with its huge dead companion. And now our worlds were racing on toward a fifth sun at which their fate would be decided, with four worlds of alien beings thundering through the void behind us.

Vira grew larger, larger, as we drew closer. Then when within ten billion miles of it, Hurg of Venus went ahead with a scouting force of ships.

Tensely we waited for Hurg's report, the news that meant life or death. When he returned he gave it at once to us.

"Vira seems entirely satisfactory!" Hurg cried. "It has no harmful radiations or surrounding meteors, and it has no planets! It is a young sun that will warm our worlds for ages!"

"We've won, then!" cried Zintnor of Mars. "We've found a sun at last!"

Julud's face gleamed in the televisor. "Make ready all of you to turn your worlds in around this sun. Tolarg, when we draw nearer you will turn Pluto first into an orbit of four billion miles radius, and Neptune and Uranus and the others will follow in successively closer orbits."

"All ready here on Pluto," Tolarg reported. "But what about those four Antolian worlds following us?"

"They'll not come on to Vira when they see us already settled here—they'll stop at the sun Walaz," said Julud. "The thing for us to do now is to bring our planets safely into orbits around Vira."

An utter tenseness held us as our worlds moved closer to Vira. The great blue-white sun was a stupendous sight, an awesome ball of fire pouring out light and heat that already warmed our nearing worlds.

As we came closer to the sun our tenseness increased. This was the most critical part of the whole vast voyage, we knew. If we made a misstep in bringing our planets into orbits around this sun it would mean that some or all of them would crash into the sun and be destroyed. Every movement of our worlds must be calculated with nicety so that they would follow a safe path in around the sun.

Our column of worlds drew nearer to Vira, passing the sun on one side. Then when a little past it, Pluto turned in around the sun. We saw the planet's

side-blasts fire rapidly as Tolarg turned his world, and rapidly Pluto curved in and as it felt the full force of Vira's attraction took up a circular orbit around the sun. Almost at the same time Neptune also turned, taking up an orbit not far inside that of Pluto's.

Rapidly our other planets followed. Murdat and Julud swung Uranus and Saturn without difficulty into correct orbits. But when Wald turned Jupiter it seemed for a moment that disaster lay ahead. Wald had underestimated the force needed to turn his huge planet and had to fire his side-blasts frantically to get it into the proper path. Even so, Jupiter's outer moons barely grazed past Saturn as the great world curved inward.

Mars and Earth followed, cutting in smoothly across the paths of the other planets and taking up orbits closer to the great sun. Hurg was already swinging Venus in inside the path of Earth. And then it was my turn. It was a ticklish job for me to take Mercury in to its orbit, for I had to take my world closer to the glaring blue sun than any of the others. But I manipulated side-blasts and back-blasts until Mercury had glided in and was moving smoothly in an orbit comparatively close to the sun Vira.

A cheer broke from all of us as we saw that on Mercury and on all our worlds the frozen-air blanket was melting into vapor, as our atmospheres thawed. And the snows that had long covered our worlds now were melting too, even those on Pluto and the outer planets. For from great Vira a tremendous outpouring of warmth and light bathed our worlds such as they had not known for many ages.

But into our exultation broke suddenly a sharp cry from Runnal of Earth. In the televisor his face was tense.

"Look back!" he cried. "The four

Antolian worlds are passing the sun Walaz! They're coming on to Vira!"

WE STARED, our triumph frozen. In the telescopes the four Antolian planets were plainly visible, passing Walaz and moving on with mounting speed toward us.

"We must do something!" Hurg cried. "If those Antolian worlds reach this sun and take up orbits around it, it means endless war with them, war that may result in our destruction!"

"We can not stop them from coming on," Julud said sadly. "I had hoped they would stop their worlds at Walaz, but they are coming on."

"If there were only some way to stop them before they get here!" Runnal exclaimed.

An idea seared across my brain. "There *is* a way of stopping them!" I cried. "I can stop them with my world, with Mercury!"

"Don't you understand?" I said. "All of Mercury's inhabitants can be transferred to other of our worlds and then I'll take Mercury out and crash it head-on into those four oncoming worlds!"

"Good, and I'll go with you, Lonnat!" cried Hurg.

"And I too!" said Tolarg, eyes gleaming.

Immediately Julud ordered the transfer of Mercury's people to other worlds as I requested. All our worlds' ships swarmed to Mercury and engaged in transporting Mercury's people to the other planets.

It was so tremendous a task that by the time Tolarg and Hurg and I with my assistants in the control-tower were the only people left on Mercury, the four oncoming worlds of the Antolians had almost reached Vira.

Quickly I opened up Mercury's propulsion-blasts and sent the little planet

hurtling out from Vira, back along the way we had come toward the four nearing worlds. Tensely I and Tolarg and Hurg held it toward them. Outside the control-tower were our waiting ships.

Toward each other, booming through space with immense speed, thundered Mercury and the four oncoming worlds. The Antolian worlds loomed larger and larger before us. Then they veered to one side.

"They're veering! They're trying to escape the collision!" cried Hurg.

"It'll do them no good!" I exclaimed. I swung Mercury aside in the same direction to meet them.

Again the column of four planets veered as they rushed closer, seeking desperately to escape the oncoming doom. Again I swung Mercury to meet them. Then the foremost of the oncoming Antolian worlds loomed immense in the heavens before our rushing planet.

"*They're going to crash!*" I cried. "*Up and away before they meet!*"

"*Up and away!*" yelled Tolarg and Hurg as we threw ourselves from the control-tower into the ships.

Our ships darted up like lightning. The rushing globe of Mercury was almost to the oncoming sphere of the first Antolian world. And then as we shot away from them into space, they met!

There was no sound in the soundless void, but there was a blinding, dazing glare of light that darkened even the great sun behind us for the moment, and then the two worlds became glowing red, molten, blazing with doom! A wave of force struck through space that rocked our fleeing ships.

And behind the first Antolian world the other three of the column came on and crashed into that glowing mass! One by one they crashed and were destroyed; and then the four worlds were one white-

hot mass that veered off into space at right-angles to Vira and away from it. The four colliding worlds had become a new small sun!

I stared after that receding, dazzling mass. There were tears in my eyes as I watched it move away, with the remains of Mercury in it. Mercury, my world, that I had piloted across the great void through the suns only to hurl it at the last into doom.

Hurg was grasping my arm excitedly. "We've won, Lonnat!" he cried. "The Antolians and their worlds destroyed, and Vira ours now for our eight remaining worlds!"

Tolarg held out his hand to me, all

mockery gone from his face now. "What you said was right, Lonnat," he said. "It's not the size of a planet that measures its importance. Yours has saved us all."

Slowly I smiled as I grasped his hand. "And you wanted to leave it behind when we started our voyage!" I said. "Well, at last our voyage is ended."

Hurg shook his head, gestured widely from Vira out toward the universe's thronging stars. "Ended for a time only. When Vira dies as our old sun died, we can go on in our worlds to another sun. Sun after sun we can hold, and man and man's power shall not end until the universe itself has ended!"