

Raiders of the Universes

by Donald Wandrei

We have always felt that something has been lost in the transition of science-fiction from its pioneer phase to its modern streamlined form. Just what that something is is hard to define, but we might begin by saying it is the touch of the breath-taking, the sense of wonder, the hint of the saga. It is that that makes "Raiders of the Universes" something just a bit more than a formula pulp story. For the author, Donald Wandrei, started his literary career as a young poet, a weird tales enthusiast, and his earliest efforts were prose-poetry about the ultimate fate of the cosmos. This story, the story of Phobar and the Dark Star, clearly belongs to his period of transition, the conscious effort to write to fit a magazine's demands—in this instance, the very early "Clayton" Astounding Stories—in which story there is reflected nevertheless the deep velvet of a poet's far-space thoughts.



IT WAS IN THE thirty-fourth century that the dark star began its famous conquest, unparalleled in stellar annals. Phobar the astronomer discovered it. He was sweeping the heavens with one of the newly-invented multipowered Sussendorf comet-hunters when something caught his eye—a new star of great brilliance in the foreground of the constellation Hercules.

For the rest of the night, he cast aside all his plans and concentrated on the one star. He witnessed an unprecedented event. Mercia's nullifier had just been invented, a curious and intricate device, based on four-dimensional geometry, that made it possible to see occurrences in the universe which had hitherto required the hundreds of years needed for light to cross the intervening space before they were visible on Earth. By a hasty calculation with the aid of this invention, Phobar found that the new star was about three thousand light years distant, and that it was hurtling backward into space at the rate of twelve hundred miles per second. The remarkable feature of his discovery was this appearance of a fourth-magnitude star where none had been known to exist. Perhaps it had come into existence this very night.

On the succeeding night, he was given a greater surprise. In line with the first star, but several hundred light-years nearer, was a second new star of even more brightness. And it, too, was hurtling backward into space at approximately twelve hundred miles per second. Phobar was astonished. Two new stars discovered within twenty-four hours in the same part of the heavens, both of the fourth magnitude! But his surprise was as nothing when on the succeeding night, even while he watched, a third new star appeared in line with these, but much closer.

At midnight he first noticed a pin-point of faint light; by one o'clock the

star was of eighth magnitude. At two it was a brilliant sun of the second magnitude blazing away from Earth like the others at a rate of twelve hundred miles per second. And on the next evening, and the next, and the next, other new stars appeared until there were seven in all, every one on a line in the same constellation Hercules, every one with the same radiance and the same proper motion, though of varying size.

Phobar had broadcast his discovery to incredulous astronomers; but as star after star appeared nightly, all the telescopes on Earth were turned toward one of the most spectacular cataclysms that history recorded. Far out in the depths of space, with unheard-of regularity and unheard-of precision, new worlds were flaming up overnight in a line that began at Hercules and extended toward the solar system.

Phobar's announcement was immediately flashed to Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, the other members of the Five World Federation. Saturn reported no evidence of the phenomena, because of the interfering rings, and the lack of Mercia's nullifier. But Jupiter, with a similar device, witnessed the phenomena and announced furthermore that many stars in the neighborhood of the novae had begun to deviate in singular and abrupt fashion from their normal positions.

There was not as yet much popular interest in the phenomena. Without Mercia's nullifier, the stars were not visible to ordinary eyes, since the light-rays would take years to reach the Earth. But every astronomer who had access to Mercia's nullifier hastened to focus his telescope on the region where extraordinary events were taking place out in the unfathomable gulf of night. Some terrific force was at work, creating worlds and disturbing the positions of stars within a radius already known to extend billions and trillions of miles from the path of the seven new stars. But of the nature of that force, astronomers could only guess.

Phobar took up his duties early on the eighth night. The last star had appeared about five hundred light-years distant. If an eighth new star was found, it should be not more than a few light-years away. But nothing happened. All night Phobar kept his telescope pointed at the probable spot, but search as he might, the heavens showed nothing new. In the morning he sought eagerly for news of any discovery made by fellow-watchers, but they, too, had found nothing unusual. Could it be that the mystery would now fade away, a new riddle of the skies?

The next evening, he took up his position once more, training his telescope on the seven bright stars, and then on the region where an eighth, if there were one, should appear. For hours he searched the abyss in vain. He could find none. Apparently the phenomena were ended. At midnight he took a last glance before entering on some tedious calculations. It was there! In the center of the telescope a faint, hazy object steadily grew in brightness. All his problems were forgotten as Phobar watched the eighth star increase hourly. Closer than any other, closer even than Alpha Centauri, the new sun appeared, scarcely three light-years away across the void surrounding the solar system. And all the while he watched, he witnessed a thing no man had ever before seen—the birth of a world!

By one o'clock, the new star was of fifth magnitude; by two it was of the first. As the faint flush of dawn began to come toward the close of that frosty, moonless November night, the new star was a great white-hot object more brilliant than any other star in the heavens. Phobar knew that when its light finally reached Earth so that ordinary eyes could see, it would be the most beautiful object in the night sky. What was the reason for these unparalleled births of worlds and the terrifying mathematical precision that characterized them?

Whatever the cosmic force behind, it was progressing toward the solar system. Perhaps it would even disturb the balance of the planets. The possible chance of such an event had already called the attention of some astronomers, but the whole phenomenon was too inexplicable to permit more than speculation.

The next evening was cloudy. Jupiter reported nothing new except that Neptune had deviated from its course and tended to pursue an erratic and puzzling new orbit.

Phobar pondered long over this last news item and turned his attention to the outermost planet on the succeeding night. To his surprise, he had great difficulty in locating it. The ephemeris was of absolutely no use. When he did locate Neptune after a brief search, he discovered it more than eighty million miles from its scheduled place! This was at one-forty. At two-ten he was thunderstruck by a special announcement sent from the Central Bureau to every observatory and astronomer of note throughout the world, proclaiming the discovery of an ultra-Plutonian planet. Phobar was incredulous. For centuries it had been proved that no planet beyond Pluto could possibly exist.

With feverish haste, Phobar ran to the huge telescope and rapidly focused it where the new planet should be. Five hundred million miles beyond Neptune was a flaming path like the beam of a giant searchlight that extended exactly to the eighth solar planet. Phobar gasped. He could hardly credit the testimony of his eyes. He looked more closely. The great stream of flame still crossed his line of vision. But this time he saw something else: at the precise farther end of the flame path was a round disk—dark!

Beyond a doubt, a new planet of vast size now formed an addition to the solar group. But that planet was almost impervious to the illuminating rays of the sun and was barely discernible. Neptune itself shone brighter than it ever had, and was falling away from the sun at a rate of twelve hundred miles per second.

All night Phobar watched the double mystery. By three o'clock, he was convinced, as far as lightning calculations showed, that the invader was hurtling toward the sun at a speed of more than ten million miles an hour. At three-fifteen, he thought that vanishing Neptune seemed brighter even than the band of fire running to the invader. At four, his belief was certainty. With amazement and awe, Phobar sat through the long, cold night, watching a spectacular and terrible catastrophe in the sky.

As dawn began to break and the stars grew paler, Phobar turned away from his telescope, his brain awhirl, his heart filled with a great fear. He had witnessed the devastation of a world, the ruin of a member of his own plane-

tary system by an invader from outer space. As dawn cut short his observations, he knew at last the cause of Neptune's brightness, knew that it was now a white-hot flaming sun that sped with increased rapidity away from the solar system. Somehow, the terrible swathe of fire that flowed from the dark star to Neptune had wrenched it out of its orbit and made of it a molten inferno.

At dawn came another bulletin from the Central Bureau. Neptune had a surface temperature of $3,000^{\circ}$ C, was defying all laws of celestial mechanics, and within three days would have left the solar system for ever. The results of such a disaster were unpredictable. The entire solar system was likely to break up. Already Uranus and Jupiter had deviated from their orbits. Unless something speedily occurred to check the onrush of the dark star, it was prophesied that the laws governing the planetary system would run to a new balance and that in the ensuing chaos the whole group would spread apart and fall toward the gulfs beyond the great surrounding void.

What was the nature of the great path of fire? What force did it represent? And was the dark star controlled by intelligence, or was it a blind wanderer from space that had come by accident? The flame-path alone implied that the dark star was guided by an intelligence that possessed the secret of inconceivable power. Menace hung in the sky now where all eyes could see in a great arc of fire!

The world was on the brink of eternity, and vast forces at whose nature men could only guess were sweeping planets and suns out of its path.

The following night was again cold and clear. High in the heavens, where Neptune should have been, hung a disk of enormously greater size. Neptune itself was almost invisible, hundreds of millions of miles beyond its scheduled position. As nearly as Phobar could estimate, not one hundredth of the sun's rays were reflected from the surface of the dark star, a proportion far below those for the other planets. Phobar had a better view of the flame-path, and it was with growing awe that he watched that strange swathe in the sky during the dead of night. It shot out from the dark star like a colossal beam or huge pillar of fire seeking a food of worlds.

With a shiver of cold fear he saw that there were now three of the bands: one toward Neptune, one toward Saturn, and one toward the sun. The first was fading, a milky, misty white; the second shone almost as bright as the first one previously had; and the third, toward the sun, was a dazzling stream of orange radiance, burning with a steady, terrible, unbelievable intensity across two and a half billions of miles of space! That gigantic flare was the most brilliant sight in the whole night sky, an awful and abysmally prophetic flame that made city streets black with staring people, a radiance whose grandeur and terrific implication of cosmic power brought beauty and the fear of doom into the heavens!

Those paths could not be explained by all the physicists and all the astronomers in the Five World Federation. They possessed the properties of light, but they were rigid bands like a tube or a solid pillar from which only the faintest of rays escaped; and they completely shut off the heavens behind them. They had, moreover, singular properties which could not be described, as if a new force were embodied in them.

Hour after hour humanity watched the spectacular progress of the dark star, watched those mysterious and threatening paths of light that flowed from the invader. When dawn came, it brought only a great fear and the oppression of impending disaster.

In the early morning, Phobar slept. When he awoke, he felt refreshed and decided to take a short walk in the familiar and peaceful light of day. He never took that walk. He opened the door on a kind of dim and reddish twilight. Not a cloud hung in the sky, but the sun shone feebly with a dull red glow, and the skies were dull and somber, as if the sun were dying as scientists had predicted it eventually would.

Phobar stared at the dull heavens in a daze, at the foreboding atmosphere and the livid sun that burned faintly as through a smoke curtain. Then the truth flashed on him—it was the terrible path of fire from the dark star! By what means he could not guess, by what appalling control of immense and inconceivable forces he could not even imagine, the dark star was sucking light and perhaps more than light from the sun!

Phobar turned and shut the door. The world had seen its last dawn. If the purpose of the dark star was destruction, none of the planets could offer much opposition, for no weapon of theirs was effective beyond a few thousand miles range at most—and the dark star could span millions. If the invader passed on, its havoc would be only a trifle smaller, for it had already destroyed two members of the solar system and was now striking at its most vital part. Without the sun, life would die, but even with the sun the planets must rearrange themselves because of the destruction of balance.

Even he could hardly grasp the vast and abysmal catastrophe that without warning had swept from space. How could the dark star have traversed three thousand light-years of space in a week's time? It was unthinkable! So stupendous a control of power, so gigantic a manipulation of cosmic forces, so annihilating a possession of the greatest secrets of the universe, was an unheard-of concentration of energy and knowledge of stellar mechanics. But the evidence of his own eyes and the path of the dark star with flaming suns to mark its progress, told him in language which could not be refuted that the dark star possessed all that immeasurable, titanic knowledge. It was the lord of the universe. There was nothing which the dark star could not crush or conquer or change. The thought of that immense, supreme power numbed his mind. It opened vistas of a civilization, and a progress, and an unparalleled mastery of all knowledge which was almost beyond conception.

Already the news had raced across the world. On Phobar's television screen flashed scenes of nightmare; the radio spewed a gibberish of terror. In one day panic had swept the Earth; on the remaining members of the Five World Federation the same story was repeated. Rioting mobs drowned out the chant of religious fanatics who hailed Judgment Day. Great fires turned the air murky and flame-shot. Machine guns spat regularly in city streets; looting, murder, and fear-crazed crimes were universal. Civilization had completely vanished overnight.

The tides roared higher than they ever had before; for every thousand people drowned on the American seaboard, a hundred thousand perished in

China and India. Dead volcanoes boomed into the worst eruptions known. Half of Japan sank during the most violent earthquake in history. Land rocked, the seas boiled, cyclones howled out of the skies. A billion eyes focused on Mecca, the mad beating of tomtoms rolled across all Africa, women and children were trampled to death by the crowds that jammed into churches.

"Has man lived in vain?" asked the philosopher.

"The world is doomed. There is no escape," said the scientist.

"The day of reckoning has come! The wrath of God is upon us!" shouted the street preachers.

In a daze, Phobar switched off the bedlam and, walking like a man asleep, strode out, he did not care where, if only to get away.

The ground and the sky were like a dying fire. The sun seemed a half-dead cinder. Only the great swathe of radiance between the sun and the dark star had any brilliance. Sinister, menacing, now larger even than the sun, the invader from beyond hung in the heavens.

As Phobar watched it, the air around him prickled strangely. A sixth sense gave warning. He turned to race back into his house. His legs failed. A fantastic orange light bathed him, countless needles of pain shot through his whole body, the world was darkened.

Earth had somehow been blotted out. There was a brief blackness, the nausea of space and of a great fall that compressed eternity into a moment. Then a swimming confusion, and outlines which gradually came to rest.

Phobar was too utterly amazed to cry out or run. He stood inside the most titanic edifice he could have imagined, a single gigantic structure vaster than all New York City. Far overhead swept a black roof fading into the horizon, beneath his feet was the same metal substance. In the midst of this giant work soared the base of a tower that pierced the roof thousands of feet above.

Everywhere loomed machines, enormous dynamos, cathode tubes a hundred feet long, masses and mountains of such fantastic apparatus as he had never encountered. The air was bluish, electric. From the black substance came a phosphorescent radiance. The triumphant drone of motors and a terrific crackle of electricity were everywhere. Off to his right purple-blue flames the size of Sequoia trees flickered around a group of what looked like condensers as huge as Gibraltar. At the base of the central tower half a mile distant Phobar could see something that resembled a great switchboard studded with silver controls. Near it was a series of mechanisms at whose purpose he could not even guess.

All this his astounded eyes took in at one confused glance. The thing that gave him unreasoning terror was the hundred-foot-high metal monster before him. It defied description. It was unlike any color known on earth, a blinding color sinister with power and evil. Its shape was equally ambiguous—it rippled like quicksilver, now compact, now spread out in a thousand limbs. But what appalled Phobar was its definite possession of rational life. More, its very thoughts were transmitted to him as clearly as though written in his own English:

“Follow me!”

Phobar's mind did not function—but his legs moved regularly. In the grasp of this mental, metal monster he was a mere automaton. Phobar noticed idly that he had to step down from a flat disk a dozen yards across. By some power, some tremendous discovery that he could not understand, he had been transported across millions of miles of space—undoubtedly to the dark star itself!

The colossal thing, indescribable, a blinding, nameless color, rippled down the hall and stooped before a disk of silvery black. In the center of the disk was a metal seat with a control board nearby.

“Be seated!”

Phobar sat down, the titan flicked the controls—and nothing happened. Phobar sensed that something was radically wrong. He felt the surprise of his gigantic companion. He did not know it then, but the fate of the solar system hung on that incident.

“Come!”

Abruptly the giant stooped, and Phobar shrank back, but a flowing mass of cold, insensate metal swept around him, lifted him fifty feet in the air. Dizzy, sick, horrified, he was hardly conscious of the whirlwind motion into which the giant suddenly shot. He had a dim impression of machines racing by, of countless other giants, of a sudden opening in the walls of the immense building, and then a rush across the surface of metal land. Even in his vertigo he had enough curiosity to marvel that there was no vegetation, no water, only the dull black metal everywhere. Yet there was air.

And then a city loomed before them. To Phobar it seemed a city of gods or giants. Fully five miles it soared toward space, its fantastic angles and arcs and cubes and pyramids making the dimensions of a totally alien geometry. Tier by tier the stupendous city, hundreds of miles wide, mounted toward a central tower like the one in the building he had left.

Phobar never knew how they got there, but his numbed mind was at last forced into clarity by a greater will. He stared about him. His captor had gone. He stood in a huge chamber circling to a dome far overhead. Before him, on a dais a full thousand feet in diameter, stood—sat—rested, whatever it might be called—another monster, far larger than any he had yet seen, like a mountain of pliant thinking, living metal. And Phobar knew he stood in the presence of the ruler.

The metal Cyclops surveyed him as Phobar might have surveyed an ant. Cold, deadly, dispassionate scrutiny came from something that might have been eyes, or a seeing intelligence locked in a metal body.

There was no sound, but inwardly to Phobar's consciousness from the peak of the titan far above him came a command:

“What are you called?”

Phobar opened his lips—but even before he spoke, he knew that the thing had understood his thought: “Phobar.”

“I am Garboreggg, ruler of Xlarbti, the Lord of the Universes.”

“Lord of the *Universes*?”

“I and my world come from one of the universes beyond the reach of your

telescopes." Phobar somehow felt that the thing was talking to him as he would to a new-born babe.

"What do you want of me?"

"Tell your Earth that I want the entire supply of your radium ores mined and placed above ground according to the instructions I give, by seven of your days hence."

A dozen questions sprang to Phobar's lips. He felt again that he was being treated like a child.

"Why do you want our radium ores?"

"Because they are the rarest of the elements on your scale, are absent on ours, and supply us with some of the tremendous energy we need."

"Why don't you obtain the ores from other worlds?"

"We do. We are taking them from all worlds where they exist. But we need yours also."

Raiders of the universe! Looting young worlds of the precious radium ores! Piracy on a cosmic scale!

"And if Earth refuses your demand?"

For answer, Garboregg rippled to a wall of the room and pressed a button. The wall dissolved, weirdly, mysteriously. A series of vast silver plates was revealed, and a battery of control levers.

"This will happen to all of your Earth unless the ores are given us."

The titan closed a switch. On the first screen flashed the picture of a huge tower such as Phobar had seen in the metal city.

Garboregg adjusted a second control that was something like a range-finder. He pressed a third lever—and from the tower leaped a surge of terrific energy, like a bolt of lightning a quarter of a mile broad. The giant closed another switch—and on the second plate flashed a picture of New York City.

Then—waiting. Seconds, minutes drifted by. The atmosphere became tense, nerve-cracking. Phobar's eyes ached with the intensity of his stare. What would happen?

Abruptly it came.

A monstrous bolt of energy streaked from the skies, purple-blue death in a pillar a fourth of a mile broad crashed into the heart of New York City swept up and down Manhattan, across and back, and suddenly vanished. In fifteen seconds, only a molten hell of fused structures and incinerated millions of human beings remained of the world's first city.

Phobar was crushed, appalled, then utter loathing for this soulless thing poured through him. If only—

"It is useless. You can do nothing," answered the ruler as though it had grasped his thought.

"But why, if you could pick me off the Earth, do you not draw the radium ores in the same way?" Phobar demanded.

"The orange-ray picks up only loose, portable objects. We can and will transport the radium ores here by means of the ray after they have been mined and placed on platforms or disks."

"Why did you select me from all the millions of people on Earth?"

"Solely because you were the first apparent scientist whom our cosmotel

chanced upon. It will be up to you to notify your Earth governments of our demand."

"But afterwards!" Phobar burst out aloud. "What then?"

"We will depart."

"It will mean death to us! The solar system will be wrecked with Neptune gone and Saturn following it!"

Garboregg made no answer. To that impassive, cold, inhuman thing, it did not matter if a nation or a whole world perished. Phobar had already seen with what deliberate calm it destroyed a city, merely to show him what power the lords of Xlarbti controlled. Besides, what guarantee was there that the invaders would not loot the Earth of everything they wanted and then annihilate all life upon it before they departed? Yet Phobar knew he was helpless, knew that the men of Earth would be forced to do whatever was asked of them, and trust that the raiders would fulfill their promise.

"Two hours remain for your stay here," came the ruler's dictum to interrupt his line of thought. "For the first half of that period you will tell me of your world and answer whatever questions I may ask. During the rest of the interval, I will explain some of the things you wish to learn about us."

Again Phobar felt Garboregg's disdain, knew that the metal giant regarded him as a kind of childish plaything for an hour or two's amusement. But he had no choice, and so he told Garboregg of the life on Earth, how it arose and along what lines it had developed; he narrated in brief the extent of man's knowledge, his scientific achievements, his mastery of weapons and forces and machines, his social organization.

When he had finished, he felt as a Stone Age man might feel in the presence of a brilliant scientist of the thirty-fourth century. If any sign of interest had shown on the peak of the metallic lord, Phobar failed to see it. But he sensed an intolerant sneer of ridicule in Garboregg, as though the ruler considered these statements to be only the most elementary of facts.

Then, for three quarters of an hour, in the manner of one lecturing an ignorant pupil, the giant crowded its thought pictures into Phobar's mind so that finally he understood a little of the raiders and of the sudden terror that had flamed from the abysses into the solar system.

"The universe of matter that you know is only one of the countless universes which comprise the cosmos," began Garboregg. "In your universe, you have a scale of ninety-two elements, you have your color-spectrum, your rays and waves of many kinds. You are subject to definite laws controlling matter and energy as you know them.

"But we are of a different universe, on a different scale from yours, a trillion light-years away in space, eons distant in time. The natural laws which govern us differ from those controlling you. In our universe, you would be hopelessly lost, completely helpless, unless you possessed the knowledge that your people will not attain even in millions of years. But we, who are so much older and greater than you, have for so long studied the nature of the other universes that we can enter and leave them at will, taking what we wish, doing as we wish, creating or destroying worlds whenever the need arises, coming and hurtling away when we choose.

"There is no vegetable life in our universe. There is only the scale of elements ranging from 842 to 966 on the extension of your own scale. At this high range, metals of complex kinds exist. There is none of what you call water, no vegetable world, no animal kingdom. Instead, there are energies, forces, rays, and waves, which are food to us and which nourish our life-stream just as pigs, potatoes, and bread are food to you.

"Trillions of years ago in your time-calculation, but only a few dozen centuries ago in ours, life arose on the giant world Kygpton in our universe. It was life, our life, the life of my people and myself, intelligence animating bodies of pliant metal, existing almost endlessly on an almost inexhaustible source of energy.

"But all matter wears down. On Kygpton there was a variety of useful metals, others that were valueless. There was comparatively little of the first, much of the second. Kygpton itself was a world as large as your entire solar system, with a diameter roughly of four billion miles. Our ancestors knew that Kygpton was dying, that the store of our most precious element Sthalreh was dwindling. But already our ancestors had mastered the forces of our universe, had made inventions that are beyond your understanding, had explored the limits of our universe in spacecars that were propelled by the free energies in space and by the attracting-repelling influences of stars.

"The metal inhabitants of Kygpton employed every invention they knew to accomplish an engineering miracle that makes your bridges and mines seem but the puny efforts of a gnat. They blasted all the remaining ores of Sthalreh from the surface and interior of Kygpton and refined them. Then they created a gigantic vacuum, a dead-field in space a hundred million miles away from their world. The dead-field was controlled from Kygpton by atomic-projectors, energy-absorbers, gravitation-nullifiers and cosmotels, range-regulators, and a host of other inventions.

"As fast as it was mined and extracted, the Sthalreh metal was vaporized, shot into the dead-field by interstellar rays, and solidified there along an invisible framework which we projected. In a decade of our time, we had pillaged Kygpton of every particle of Sthalreh. And then in our skies hung an artificial world, a manufactured sphere, a giant new planet, the world you yourself are now on—Xlarbti!

"We did not create a solid globe. We left chambers, tunnels, passageways, storerooms throughout it or piercing it from surface to surface. Thus, even as Xlarbti was being created we provided for everything that we needed or could need—experimental laboratories, sub-surface vaults, chambers for the innumerable, huge ray dynamos, energy storage batteries, and other apparatus which we required.

"And when all was ready, we transferred by space-cars and by atomic individuation all our necessities from Kygpton to the artificial world Xlarbti. And when everything was prepared, we destroyed the dead-field by duplicate control from Xlarbti, turned our repulsion-power on full against the now useless and dying giant world Kygpton, and swung upon our path.

"But our whole universe is incredibly old. It was mature before ever your young suns flamed out of the gaseous nebulae, it was decaying when your

molten planets were flung from the central sun, it was dying before the boiling seas had given birth to land upon your sphere. And while we had enough of our own particular electrical food to last us for a million of your years, and enough power to guide Xlarbti to other universes, we had exhausted all the remaining energy of our entire universe. And when we finally left it to dwindle behind us in the black abysses of space, we left it, a dead cinder, devoid of life, vitiated of activity, and utterly lacking in cosmic forces, a universe finally run down.

"The universes, as you may know, are set off from each other by totally black and empty abysses, expanses so vast that light-rays have not yet crossed many of them. How did we accomplish the feat of traversing such a gulf? By the simplest of means: acceleration. Why? Because to remain in our universe meant inevitable death. We gambled on the greatest adventure in all the cosmos.

"To begin with, we circled our universe to the remotest point opposite where we wanted to leave it. We then turned our attraction powers on part way so that the millions of stars before us drew us ahead, then we gradually stepped up the power to its full strength, thus ever increasing our speed. At the same time, as stars passed to our rear in our flight, we turned our repulsion-rays against them, stepping that power up also.

"Our initial speed was twenty-four miles per second. Midway in our universe we had reached the speed of your light—186,000 miles per second. By the time we left our universe, we were hurtling at a speed which we estimated to be 1,600,000,000 miles per second. Yet even at that tremendous speed, it took us years to cross from our universe to yours. If we had encountered even a planetoid at that enormous rate, we would probably have been annihilated in white-hot death. But we had planned well, and there are no superiors to our stellar mechanics, our astronomers, our scientists.

"When we finally hurtled from the black void into your universe, we found what we had only dared hope for: a young universe, with many planets and cooling worlds rich in radium ores, the only element in your scale that can help to replenish our vanishing energy. Half your universe we have already deprived of its ores. Your Earth has more than we want. Then we shall continue on our way, to loot the rest of the worlds, before passing on to another universe. We are a planet without a universe. We will wander and pillage until we find a universe like the one we come from, or until Xlarbti itself disintegrates and we perish.

"We could easily wipe out all the dwellers on Earth and mine the ores ourselves. But that would be a needless waste of our powers, for since you can not defy us, and since the desire for life burns as high in you as in us and as it does in all sensate things in all universes, your people will save themselves from death and save us from wasting energy by mining the ores for us. What happens afterwards, we do not care.

"The seven new suns that you saw were dead worlds that we used as buffers to slow down Xlarbti. The full strength of our repulsion-force directed against any single world necessarily turns it into a liquid or gaseous state depending on various factors. Your planet Neptune was pulled out of the

solar system by the attraction of Xlarbti's mass. The flame-paths, as you call them, are directed streams of energy for different purposes: the one to the sun supplies us, for instance, with heat, light, and electricity, which in turn are stored up for eventual use.

"The orange-ray that you felt is one of our achievements. It is similar to the double-action pumps used in some of your sulphur mines, whereby a pipe is inclosed in a larger pipe, and hot water forced down through the larger tubing returns sulphur-laden through the central pipe. The orange-ray instantaneously dissolves any portable object up to a certain size, propels it back to Xlarbti through its center which is the reverse ray, and here reforms the object, just as you were recreated on the disk that you stood on when you regained consciousness.

"But I have not enough time to explain everything on Xlarbti to you; nor would you comprehend it all if I did. Your stay is almost up.

"In that one control-panel lies all the power that we have mastered," boasted Garboregg with supreme egotism. "It connects with the individual controls throughout Xlarbti."

"What is the purpose of some of the levers?" asked Phobar, with a desperate hope in his thoughts.

A filament of metal whipped to the panel from the lord of Xlarbti. "This first section duplicates the control-panel that you saw in the laboratory where you opened your eyes. Do not think that you can make use of this information—in ten minutes you will be back on your Earth to deliver our command. Between now and that moment you will be so closely watched that you can do nothing and will have no opportunity to try.

"This first lever controls the attraction rays, the second the repulsion force. The third dial regulates the orange-ray by which you will be returned to Earth. The fourth switch directs the electrical bolt that destroyed New York City. Next it is a device that we have never had occasion to use. It releases the Krangor-wave throughout Xlarbti. Its effect is to make each atom of Xlarbti, the Sthalreh metal and everything on it become compact, to do away with the empty spaces that exist in every atom. Theoretically, it would reduce Xlarbti to a fraction of its present size, diminish its mass while its weight and gravity remained as before.

"The next lever controls matter to be transported between here and the first laboratory. Somewhat like the orange-ray, it distintegrates the object and reassembles it here."

So that was what Phobar's captor had been trying to do with him back there in the laboratory! "Why was I not brought here by that means?" burst out Phobar.

"Because you belong to a different universe," answered Garboregg.

"Without experimentation, we cannot tell what natural laws of ours you would not be subject to, but this is one of them." A gesture of irritation seemed to come from him.

"Some laws hold good in all the universes we have thus far investigated. The orange-ray, for instance, picked you up as it would have plucked one of us from the surface of Kygpton. But on Xlarbti, which is composed entirely

of Stalreh, your atomic nature and physical constitution are so different from ours that they were unaffected by the energy that ordinarily transports objects here."

Thus the metal nightmare went rapidly over the control-panel. At length Phobar's captor, or another thing like him, re-entered when Garboregg flicked a strange-looking protuberance on the panel.

"You will now be returned to your world," came the thought of Garboregg. "We shall watch you through our cosmotel to see that you deliver our instructions. Unless the nations of Earth obey us, they will be obliterated at the end of seven days."

A wild impulse to smash that impassive, metallic monster passed from Phobar as quickly as it came. He was helpless. Sick and despairing, he felt the cold, baffling-colored metal close around him again; once more he was borne aloft for the journey to the laboratory, from there to be propelled back to Earth.

Seven days of grace! But Phobar knew that less than ten minutes remained to him. Only here could he possibly accomplish anything. Once off the surface of Xlarbti, there was not the remotest chance that all the nations of Earth could reach the invaders or even attempt to defy them. Yet what could he alone do in a week, to say nothing of ten minutes?

He sensed the amused, supercilious contempt of his captor. That was really the greatest obstacle, this ability of theirs to read thought-pictures. And already he had given them enough word-pictures of English so that they could understand. . . .

In back of Phobar's mind the ghost of a desperate thought suddenly came. What was it he had learned years ago in college? Homer—"The Odyssey"—Plutarch. . . . From rusty, disused corners of memory crept forth the half-forgotten words. He bent all his efforts to the task, not daring to think ahead or plan ahead or visualize anything but the Greek words.

He felt the bewilderment of his captor. To throw it off the track, Phobar suddenly let an ancient English nursery rime slip into his thoughts. The disgust that emanated from his captor was laughable; Phobar could have shouted aloud. But the Greek words. . . .

Already the pair had left the mountain-high titan city far behind; they rippled across the smooth, black surface of Xlarbti, and bore like rifle bullets down on the swiftly-looming laboratory. In a few minutes it would be too late forever. Now the lost Greek words burst into Phobar's mind, and, hoping against hope, he thought in Greek word-pictures which his captor could not understand. He weighed chances, long shots. Into his brain flashed an idea. . . . But they were upon the laboratory; a stupendous door dissolved weirdly into shimmering haze; they sped through.

Phobar's hand clutched a bulge in his pocket. Would it work? How could it?

They were beyond the door now and racing across the great expanse of the floor, past the central tower, past the control-panel which he had first seen. . . .

And as if by magic there leaped into Phobar's mind a clear-cut, vivid

picture of violet oceans of energy crackling and streaking from the heavens to crash through the laboratory roof and barely miss striking his captor behind. Even as Phobar created the image of that terrific death, his captor whirled around in a lightning movement, a long arm of metal flicking outward at the same instant to drop Phobar to the ground.

Like a flash Phobar was on his feet; his hand whipped from his pocket, and with all his strength he flung a gleaming object straight toward the fifth lever on the control-panel a dozen yards away. As a clumsy arrow would, his oversize bunch of keys twisted to their mark, clanked, and spread against the fifth control, which was the size regulator.

As rapidly as Phobar's captor had spun around, it reversed again, having guessed the trick. A tentacle of pliant metal snaked toward Phobar like a streak of flame.

But in those few seconds a terrific holocaust had taken place. As Phobar's keys spattered against the fifth lever, there came an immediate, growing, strange, high whine, and a sickening collapse of the very surface beneath them. Everywhere outlines of objects wavered, changed, melted, shrank with a steady and nauseatingly swift motion. The roof of the laboratory high overhead plunged downward; the far-distant walls swept inward, contracted. And the metal monsters themselves dwindled as though they were vast rubber figures from which the air was hissing.

Phobar sprang back as the tentacle whipped after him. Only that jump and the suddenly dwarfing dimensions of the giant saved him. And even in that instant of wild action, Phobar shouted aloud—for this whole world was collapsing, together with everything on it, except he himself who came of a different universe and remained unaffected! It was the long shot he had gambled on, the one chance he had to strike a blow.

All over the shrinking laboratory the monsters were rushing toward him. His dwindling captor flung another tentacle toward the control-panel to replace the size-regulating lever. But Phobar had anticipated that possibility and had already leaped to the switchboard, sweeping a heavy bar from its place and crashing it down on the lever so that it could not be replaced without being repaired. Almost in the same move he had bounded away again, the former hundred-foot giant now scarcely more than his own height. But throughout the laboratory, the other metal things had halted in their tasks and were racing onward.

Phobar always remembered that battle in the laboratory as a scene from some horrible nightmare. The catastrophe came so rapidly that he could hardly follow the whirlwind events. The half dozen great leaps he made from the lashing tentacles of his pursuer sufficed to give him a few seconds' respite, and then the weird howling sound of the tortured world swelled to a piercing wail. His lungs were laboring from the violence of his exertions; again and again he barely escaped from the curling whips of metal tentacles. And now the monster was hardly a foot high; the huge condensers and tubes and colossal machinery were like those of a pygmy laboratory. And overhead the roof plunged ever downward.

But Phobar was cornered at last. He stood in the center of a circle of the

foot-high things. His captor suddenly shot forth a dozen rope-like arms toward him as the others closed in. He had not even a weapon, for he had dropped the bar in his first mad bound away from the control-panel. He saw himself trapped in his own trick, for in minutes at most the laboratory would be crushing him with fearful force.

Blindly Phobar reverted to a primitive defense in this moment of infinite danger and kicked with all his strength at the squat monster before him. The thing tried to whirl aside, but Phobar's shoe squashed thickly through and in a disorder of quivering pieces, the metal creature fell, and subsided. Knowing at last that the invaders were vulnerable and how they could be killed, Phobar went leaping and stamping on those nearest him. Under foot, they disintegrated into little pulpy lumps of inert metal.

In a trice he broke beyond the circle and darted to the control-panel. One quick glance showed him that the roof was now scarcely a half dozen yards above. With fingers that fumbled in haste at tiny levers and dials, he spun several of them—the repulsion-ray full—the attraction-ray full. And when they were set, he picked up the bar he had dropped and smashed the controls so that they were helplessly jammed. He could almost feel the planet catapult through the heavens.

The laboratory roof was only a foot over his head. He whirled around, squashed a dozen tiny creeping things, leaped to a disk that was now not more than a few inches broad. Stooping low, balancing himself precariously, he somehow managed to close the tiny switch. A haze of orange light enveloped him, there came a great vertigo and dizziness and pain, he felt himself falling through bottomless spaces . . .

So exhausted that he could scarcely move, Phobar blinked his eyes open to brilliant daylight in the chill of a November Indian summer noon. The sun shone radiant in the heavens; off in the distance he heard a pandemonium of bells and whistles. Wearily he noticed that there were no flamepaths in the sky.

Staggering weakly, he made his way to the observatory, mounted the steps with tired limbs, and wobbled to the eyepiece of his telescope which he had left focused on the dark star two hours before. Almost trembling, he peered through it.

The dark star was gone. Somewhere far out in the abysses of the universe, a runaway world plunged headlong at ever mounting speed to uncharted regions under its double acceleration of attraction and repulsion.

A sigh of contentment came from his lips as he sank into a heavy and profound sleep. Later he would learn of the readjustments in the solar system, and of the colder climate that came to earth, and of the vast changes permanently made by the invading planet, and of a blazing new star discovered in Orion that might signify the birth of a sun or the death of a metallic dark world.

But these were events to be, and he demanded his immediate reward of a day's dreamless slumber.