

Wanderer of Infinity



Harl Vincent

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Wanderer of Infinity

By Harl Vincent

Lenville! Bert Redmond had never heard of the place until he received Joan's letter. But here it was, a tiny straggling village cuddled amongst the Ramapo hills of lower New York State, only a few miles from Tuxedo. There was a prim, white-painted church, a general store with the inevitable gasoline pump at the curb, and a dozen or so of weatherbeaten frame houses. That was all. It was a typical, dusty cross-roads hamlet of the vintage of thirty years before, utterly isolated and apart from the rushing life of the broad concrete highway so short a distance away.

In the uncharted realms of infra-dimensional space Bert meets a pathetic figure—
The Wanderer.

Bert stopped his ancient and battered flivver at the corner where a group of overalled loungers was gathered. Its asthmatic motor died with a despairing cough as he cut the ignition.

"Anyone tell me where to find the Carmody place?" he sang out.

No one answered, and for a moment there was no movement amongst his listeners. Then one of the loungers, an old man with a stubble of gray beard, drew near and regarded him through thick spectacles.

"You ain't aimin' to go up there alone, be you?" the old fellow asked in a thin cracked voice.

"Certainly. Why?" Bert caught a peculiar gleam in the watery old eyes

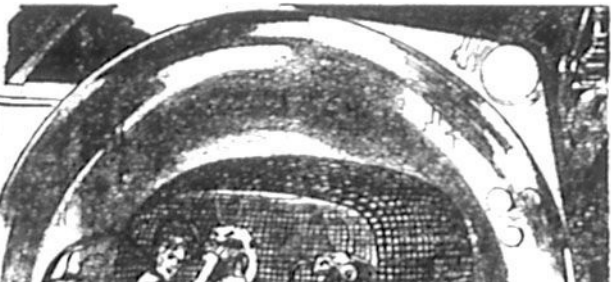
that were enlarged so enormously by the thick lenses. It was fear of the supernatural that lurked there, stark terror, almost.

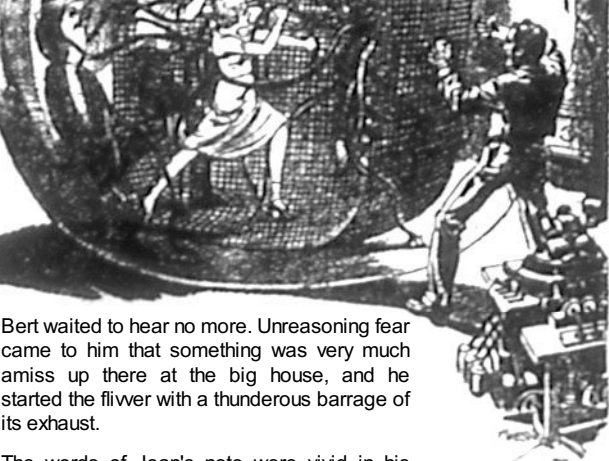
"Don't you go up to the Carmody place, young feller. They's queer doin's in the big house, is why. Blue lights at night, an' noises inside—an'an'—an' cracklin' like thunder overhead—"

"Aw shet up, Gramp!" Another of the idlers, a youngster with chubby features, and downy of lip and chin, sauntered over from the group, interrupting the old man's discourse. "Don't listen to him," he said to Bert. "He's cracked a mite—been seein' things. The big house is up yonder on the hill. See, with the red chimbley showin' through the trees. They's a windin' road down here a piece."

Bert followed the pointing finger with suddenly anxious gaze. It was not an inviting spot, that tangle of second-growth timber and underbrush that hid the big house on the lonely hillside; it might conceal almost anything. And Joan Parker was there!

The one called Gramp was screeching invectives at the grinning bystanders. "You passel o' young idjits!" he stormed. "I seen it, I tell you. An'—an' heard things, too, The devil hisself is up there—an' his imps. We'd oughtn't to let this feller go...."





Bert waited to hear no more. Unreasoning fear came to him that something was very much amiss up there at the big house, and he started the flivver with a thunderous barrage of its exhaust.

The words of Joan's note were vivid in his mind: "Come to me, Bert, at the Carmody place in Lenville. Believe me, I need you." Only that, but it had been sufficient to bring young Redmond across three states to this measly town that wasn't even on the road maps.

Bert yanked the bouncing car into the winding road that led up the hill, and thought grimly of the quarrel with Joan two years before. He had told her then, arrogantly, that she'd need him some day. But now that his words had proved true the fact brought him no consolation nor the slightest elation. Joan was there in this lonely spot, and she did need him. That was enough.

He attacked it in vain with his fists.

He ran nervous fingers through his already tousled mop of sandy hair—a habit he had when disturbed—and nearly wrecked the car on a gray boulder that encroached on one of the two ruts which, together had been termed a road.

Stupid, that quarrel of theirs. And how stubborn both had been! Joan had insisted on going to the big city to follow the career her brother had chosen for her. Chemistry, biology, laboratory work! Bert sniffed, even now. But he had been equally stubborn in his insistence that she marry him instead and settle down on the middle-Western fruit farm.

With a sudden twist, the road turned in at the entrance of a sadly neglected estate. The grounds of the place were overrun with rank growths and the driveway was covered with weeds. The tumble-down gables of a decrepit frame house peeped out through the trees. It was a rambling old building that once had been a mansion—the "big house" of the natives. A musty air of decay was upon it, and crazily askew window shutters proclaimed deep-shrouded mystery within.

Bert drew up at the rickety porch and stopped the flivver with its usual shuddering jerk.

As if his coming had been watched for through the stained glass of its windows, the door was flung violently open. A white-clad figure darted across the porch, but not before Bert had untangled the lean six feet of him from under the flivver's wheel and bounded up the steps.

"Joan!"

"Bert! I—I'm sorry."

"Me too." Swallowing hard, Bert Redmond held her close.

"But I won't go back to Indiana!" The girl raised her chin and the old defiance was in her tearful gaze.

Bert stared. Joan was white and wan, a mere shadow of her old self. And she was trembling, hysterical.

"That's all right," he whispered. "But tell me now, what is it? What's wrong?"

With sudden vigor she was drawing him into the house. "It's Tom," she quavered. "I can't do a thing with him; can't get him to leave here. And something terrible is about to happen, I know. I thought perhaps you could help, even if—"

"Tom Parker here?" Bert was surprised that the fastidious older brother should leave his comfortable city quarters and lose himself in this God-forsaken place. "Sure, I'll help, dear—if I can."

"You can; oh, I'm sure you can," the girl went on tremulously. A spot of color flared in either cheek. "It's his experiments. He came over from New York about a year ago and rented this old house. The city laboratory wasn't secluded enough. And I've helped him until now in everything. But I'm frightened; he's playing with dangerous forces. He doesn't understand—won't understand. But I saw...."

And then Joan Parker slumped into a high-backed chair that stood in the ancient paneled hall. Soft waves of her chestnut hair framed the pinched, terrified face, and wide eyes looked up at Bert, with the same horror he had seen in those of the old fellow the village. A surge of the old tenderness welled up in him and he wanted to take her in his arms.

"Wait," she said, swiftly rising. "I'll let you judge for yourself. Here—go into the laboratory and talk with Tom."

She pushed him forward and through a door that closed softly behind him. He was in a large room that was cluttered with the most bewildering array of electrical mechanisms he had ever seen. Joan had remained outside.

Tom Parker, his hair grayer and forehead higher than when Bert had seen him last, rose from where he was stooping over a work bench. He advanced, smiling, and his black eyes were alight with genuine pleasure. Bert had anticipated a less cordial welcome.

"Albert Redmond!" exclaimed the older man. "This is a surprise. Glad to see you, boy, glad to see you."

He meant it, Tom did, and Bert wrung the extended hand heartily. Yet he dared not tell of Joan's note. The two men had always been the very best of friends—except in the matter of Joan's future.

"You haven't changed much," Bert ventured.

Tom Parker laughed. "Not about Joan, if that is what you mean. She likes the work and will go far in it. Why, Bert—"

"Sa-ay, wait a minute." Bert Redmond's mien was solemn. "I saw her outside, Tom, and was shocked. She isn't herself—doesn't look at all well. Haven't you noticed, man?"

The older man sobered and a puzzled frown crossed his brow. "I have noticed, yes. But it's nonsense, Bert, I swear it is. She has been having dreams—worrying a lot, it seems. Guess I'll have to send her

to the doctor?"

"Dreams? Worry?" Bert thought of the old man called Gramp.

"Yes. I'll tell you all about it—what we're working on here—and show you. It's no wonder she gets that way, I guess. I've been a bit loony with the marvel of it myself at times. Come here."

Tom led him to an intricate apparatus which bore some resemblance to a television radio. There were countless vacuum tubes and their controls, tiny motors belted to slotted disks that would spin when power was applied, and a double eyepiece.

"Before I let you look," Tom was saying, "I'll give you an idea of it, to prepare you. This is a mechanism I've developed for a study of the less-understood dimensions. The results have more than justified my expectations—they're astounding. Bert, we can actually see into these realms that were hitherto unexplored. We can examine at close range the life of these other planes. Think of it!"

"Life—plane—dimensions?" said Bert blankly. "Remember, I know very little about this science of yours."

"Haven't you read the news-paper accounts of Einstein's researches and of others who have delved into the theory of relativity?"

"Sa-ay! I read them, but they don't tell me a thing. It's over my head a mile."

"Well, listen: this universe of ours—space and all it contains—is a thing of five dimensions, a continuum we have never begun to

contemplate in its true complexity and immensity. There are three of its dimensions with which we are familiar. Our normal senses perceive and understand them—length, breadth and thickness. The fourth dimension, time, or, more properly, the time-space interval, we have only recently understood. And this fifth dimension, Bert, is something no man on earth has delved into—excepting myself."

"You don't say." Bert was properly impressed; the old gleam of the enthusiastic scientist was in Tom's keen eyes.

"Surest thing. I have called this fifth dimension the interval of oscillation, though the term is not precisely correct. It has to do with the arrangement, the speed and direction of movement, and the polarity of protonic and electronic energy charges of which matter is comprised. It upsets some of our old and accepted natural laws—one in particular. Bert, two objects can occupy the same space at the same time, though only one is perceptible to our earthbound senses. Their differently constituted atoms exist in the same location without interference—merely vibrating in different planes. There are many such planes in this fifth dimension of space, all around us, some actually inhabited. Each plane has a different atomic structure of matter, its own oscillation interval of the energy that is matter, and a set of natural laws peculiar to itself. I can't begin to tell you; in fact, I've explored only a fraction. But here—look!"

Tom's instrument set up a soft purring at his touch of a lever, and every blue light flickered from behind the double eyepiece, casting grotesque shadows on walls and ceiling, and paling to insignificance the light of day that filtered through the long-unwashed windows.

Bert squinted through the hooded twin lenses. At first he was dazzled

and confused by the rapidly whirling light-images, but these quickly resolved into geometric figures, an inconceivable number of them, extending off into limitless space in a huge arc, revolving and tumbling like the colored particles in an old-fashioned kaleidoscope. Cubes, pyramids and cones of variegated hues. Swift-rushing spheres and long slim cylinders of brilliant blue-white; gleaming disks of polished jet, spinning....

Abruptly the view stabilized, and clear-cut stationary objects sprang into being. An unbroken vista of seamed chalky cliffs beside an inky sea whose waters rose and fell rhythmically yet did not break against the towering palisade. Wave-less, glass-smooth, these waters. A huge blood-red sun hanging low in a leaden though cloudless sky, reflecting scintillating flecks of gold and purple brilliance from the ocean's black surface.

At first there was no sign of life to be seen. Then a mound was rising up from the sea near the cliff, a huge tortoiselike shape that stretched forth several flat members which adhered to the vertical white wall as if held by suction disks. Ponderously the thing turned over and headed up from the inky depths, spewing out from its concave under side an army of furry brown bipeds. Creatures with bloated torsos in which head and body merged so closely as to be indistinguishable one from the other, balanced precariously on two spindly legs, and with long thin arms like tentacles, waving and coiling. Spiderlike beings ran out over the smooth dark surface of the sea as if it were solid ground.

"Jupiter!" Bert looked up from the eyepiece, blinking into the triumphant grinning face of Tom Parker. "You mean to tell me these creatures are real?" he demanded. "Living here, all around us, in

another plane where we can't see them without this machine of yours?"

"Surest thing. And this is but one of many such planes."

"They can't get through, to our plane?"

"Lord no, man, how could they?"

A sharp crackling peal of thunder rang out overhead and Tom Parker went suddenly white. Outside, the sky was cloudless.

"And that—what's that?" Bert remembered the warning of the old man of the village, and Joan's obvious fear.

"It—it's only a physical manifestation of the forces I use in obtaining visual connection, one of the things that worries Joan. Yet I can't find any cause for alarm...."

The scientist's voice droned on endlessly, technically. But Bert knew there was something Tom did not understand, something he was trying desperately to explain to himself.

Thunder rumbled once more, and Bert returned his eyes to the instrument. Directly before him in the field of vision a group of the spider men advanced over the pitchy sea with a curiously constructed cage of woven transparent material which they set down at a point so close by that it seemed he could touch it if he stretched out his hand. The illusion of physical nearness was perfect. The evil eyes of the creatures were fastened upon him; tentacle arms uncoiled and reached forth as if to break down the barrier that separated them.

And then a scream penetrated his consciousness, wrenching him back to consideration of his immediate surroundings. The laboratory door burst open and Joan, pale and disheveled, dashed into the room.

Tom shouted, running forward to intercept her, and Bert saw what he had not seen before, a ten-foot circle of blue-white metal set in the floor and illuminated by a shaft of light from a reflector on the ceiling above Tom's machine.

"Joan—the force area!" Tom was yelling. "Keep away!"

Tom had reached the distraught girl and was struggling with her over on the far side of the disk.

There came a throbbing of the very air surrounding them, and Bert saw Tom and Joan on the other side of the force area, their white faces indistinct and wavering as if blurred by heat waves rising between. The rumblings and cracklings overhead increased in intensity until the old house swayed and creaked with the concussions. Hazy forms materialized on the lighted disk—the cage of the transparent, woven basket—dark spidery forms within. The creatures from that other plane!

"Joan! Tom!" Bert's voice was soundless as he tried to shout, and his muscles were paralyzed when he attempted to hurl himself across to them. The blue-white light had spread and formed a huge bubble of white brilliance, a transparent elastic solid that flung him back when he attacked it in vain with his fists.

Within its confines he saw Joan and her brother scuffling with the spider men, tearing at the tentacle arms that encircled them and drew them relentlessly into the basket-weave cage. There was a tremendous thump and the warping of the very universe about them all. Bert Redmond, his body racked by insupportable tortures, was hurled into the black abyss of infinity....

This was not death nor was it a dream from which he would awaken. After that moment of mental agony and ghastly physical pain, after a dizzying rush through inky nothingness, Bert knew suddenly that he was very much alive. If he had lost consciousness at all, it had been for no great length of time. And yet there was this sense of strangeness in his surroundings, a feeling that he had been transported over some nameless gulf of space. He had dropped to his knees, but with the swift return of normal faculties he jumped to his feet.

A tall stranger confronted him, a half-nude giant with bronzed skin and of solemn visage. The stalwart build of him and the smooth contours of cheek and jaw proclaimed him a man not yet past middle age, but his uncropped hair was white as the driven snow.

They stood in a spherical chamber of silvery metal, Bert and this giant, and the gentle vibration of delicately balanced machinery made itself felt in the structure. Of Joan and Tom there was no sign.

"Where am I?" Bert demanded. "And where are my friends? Why am I with you, without them?"

Compassion was in the tall stranger's gaze—and something more. The pain of a great sorrow filled the brown eyes that looked down at Bert, and resignation to a fate that was shrouded in ineffable mystery.

"Trust me," he said in a mellow slurring voice. "Where you are, you shall soon learn. You are safe. And your friends will be located."

"*Will* be located! Don't you *know* where they are?" Bert laid hands on the big man's wrists and shook him impatiently. The stranger was too calm and unmoved in the face of this tremendous thing which had

come to pass.

"I know where they have been taken, yes. But there is no need of haste out here in infra-dimensional space, for time stands still. We will find it a simple matter to reach the plane of their captors, the Bardeks, within a few seconds after your friends arrive there. My plane segregator—this sphere—will accomplish this in due season."

Strangely, Bert believed him. This talk of dimensions and planes and of the halting of time was incomprehensible, but somehow there was communicated to his own restless nature something of the placid serenity of the white-haired stranger. He regarded the man more closely, saw there was an alien look about him that marked him as different and apart from the men of Earth. His sole garment was a wide breech clout of silvery stuff that glinted with changing colors—hues foreign to nature on Earth. His was a superhuman perfection of muscular development, and there was an indescribable mingling of gentleness and sternness in his demeanor. With a start, Bert noted that his fingers were webbed, as were his toes.

"Sa-ay," Bert exclaimed, "who are you, anyway?"

The stranger permitted himself the merest ghost of a smile. "You may call me Wanderer," he said. "I am the Wanderer of Infinity."

"Infinity! You are not of my world?"

"But no."

"You speak my language."

"It is one of many with which I am familiar."

"I—I don't understand." Bert Redmond was like a man in a trance, completely under the spell of his amazing host's personality.

"It is given to few men, to understand." The Wanderer fell silent, his arms folded across his broad chest. And his great shoulders bowed as under the weight of centuries of mankind's cares. "Yet I would have you understand, O Man-Called-Bert, for the tale is a strange one and is heavy upon me."

It was uncanny that this Wanderer should address him by name. Bert thrilled to a new sense of awe.

"But," he objected, "my friends are in the hands of the spider men. You said we'd go to them. Good Lord, man, I've got to do it!"

"You forget that time means nothing here. We will go to them in precise synchronism with the proper time as existent in that plane."

The Wanderer's intense gaze held Bert speechless, hypnotized. A swift dimming of the sphere's diffused illumination came immediately, and darkness swept down like a blanket, thick and stifling. This was no ordinary darkness, but utter absence of light—the total obscurity of Erebus. And the hidden motors throbbed with sudden new vigor.

"Behold!" At the Wanderer's exclamation the enclosing sphere became transparent and they were in the midst of a dizzying maelstrom of flashing color. Brilliant geometric shapes, there were, whirling off into the vastness of space; as Bert had seen them in Tom Parker's instrument. A gigantic arc of rushing light-forms spanning the black gulf of an unknown cosmos. And in the foreground directly under the sphere was a blue-white disk, horizontally fixed—a substantial and familiar object, with hazy surroundings likewise familiar.

"Isn't that the metal platform in my friend's laboratory?" asked Bert, marveling.

"It is indeed." The mellow voice of the Wanderer was grave, and he laid a hand on Bert's arm. "And for so long as it exists it constitutes a serious menace to your civilization. It is a gateway to your world, a means of contact with your plane of existence for those many vicious hordes that dwell in other planes of the fifth dimension. Without it, the Bardeks had not been able to enter and effect the kidnaping of your friends. Oh, I tried so hard to warn them—Parker and the girl—but could not do it in time."

A measure of understanding came to Bert Redmond. This was the thing Joan had feared and which Tom Parker had neglected to consider. The forces which enabled the scientist to see into the mysterious planes of this uncharted realm were likewise capable of providing physical contact between the planes, or actual travel from one to the other. Tom had not learned how to use the forces in this manner, but the Bardeks had.

"We travel now along a different set of coordinates, those of space-time," said the Wanderer. "We go into the past, through eons of time as it is counted in your world."

"Into the past," Bert repeated. He stared foolishly at his host, whose eyes glittered strangely in the flickering light.

"Yes, we go to my home—to what was my home."

"To your home? Why?" Bert shrank before the awful contorted face of the Wanderer. A spasm of ferocity had crossed it on his last words.

Some fearful secret must be gnawing at the big man's vitals.

"Again you must trust me. To understand, it is necessary that you see."

The gentle whirl of machinery rose to a piercing shriek as the Wanderer manipulated the tiny levers of a control board that was set in the smooth transparent wall. And the rushing light-forms outside became a blur at first, then a solid stream of cold liquid fire into which they plunged at breakneck speed.

There was no perceptible motion of the sphere, however. It was the only object that seemed substantial and fixed in an intangible and madly gyrating universe. Its curved wall, though transparent, was solid, comforting to the touch.

Standing by his instrument board, the Wanderer was engrossed in a tabulation of mathematical data he was apparently using in setting the many control knobs before him. Plotting their course through infinity! His placid serenity of countenance had returned, but there was a new eagerness in his intense gaze and his strong fingers trembled while he manipulated the tiny levers and dials.

Outside the apparently motionless sphere, a never-ending riot of color surged swiftly and silently by, now swirling violently in great sweeping arcs of blinding magnificence, now changing character and driving down from dizzying heights as a dim-lit column of gray that might have been a blast of steam from some huge inverted geyser of the cosmos. Always there were the intermittent black bands that flashed swiftly across the brightness, momentarily darkening the sphere and then passing on into the limbo of this strange realm

between planes.

Abruptly then, like the turning of a page in some gigantic book, the swift-moving phantasmagoria swung back into the blackness of the infinite and was gone. Before them stretched a landscape of rolling hills and fertile valleys. Overhead, the skies were a deep blue, almost violet, and twin suns shone down on the scene. The sphere drifted along a few hundred feet from the surface.

"Urtraria!" the Wanderer breathed reverently. His white head was bowed and his great hands clutched the small rail of the control board.

In a daze of conflicting emotions, Bert watched as this land of peace and plenty slipped past beneath them. This, he knew, had been the home of Wanderer. In what past age or at how great a distance it was from his own world, he could only imagine. But that the big man who called himself Wanderer loved this country there was not the slightest doubt. It was a fetish with him, a past he was in duty bound to revisit time and again, and to mourn over.

Smooth broad lakes, there were, and glistening streams that ran their winding courses through well-kept and productive farmlands. And scattered communities with orderly streets and spacious parks. Roads, stretching endless ribbons of wide metallic surface across the countryside. Long two-wheeled vehicles skimming over the roads with speed so great the eye could scarcely follow them. Flapping-winged ships of the air, flying high and low in all directions. A great city of magnificent dome-topped buildings looming up suddenly at the horizon.

The sphere proceeded swiftly toward the city. Once a great air liner, flapping huge gossamerlike wings, drove directly toward them. Bert cried out in alarm and ducked instinctively, but the ship passed *through* them and on its way. It was as if they did not exist in this

spherical vehicle of the dimensions.

"We are here only as onlookers," the Wanderer explained sadly, "and can have no material existence here. We can not enter this plane, for there is no gateway. Would that there were."

Now they were over the city and the sphere came to rest above a spacious flat roof where there were luxurious gardens and pools, and a small glass-domed observatory. A woman was seated by one of the pools, a beautiful woman with long golden hair that fell in soft profusion over her ivory shoulders and bosom. Two children, handsome stalwart boys of probably ten and twelve, romped with a domestic animal which resembled a foxhound of Earth but had glossy short-haired fur and flippers like these of a seal. Suddenly these three took to the water and splashed with much vigor and joyful shouting.

The Wanderer gripped Bert's arm with painful force. "My home!" he groaned. "Understand, Earthling? This was my home, these my wife and children—destroyed through my folly. Destroyed, I say, in ancient days. And by my accursed hand—when the metal monsters came."

There was madness in the Wanderer's glassy stare, the madness of a tortured soul within. Bert began to fear him.

"We should leave," he said. "Why torment yourself with such memories? My friends...."

"Have patience, Earthling. Don't you understand that I sinned and am therefore condemned to this torment? Can't you see that I *must* unburden my soul of its ages-old load, that I must revisit the scene of my crime, that others must see and know? It is part of my punishment,

and you, perforce, must bear witness. Moreover, it is to help your friends and your world that I bring you here. Behold!"

A man was coming out of the observatory, a tall man with bronzed skin and raven locks. It was the Wanderer himself, the Wanderer of the past, as he had been in the days of his youth and happiness.

The woman by the pool had risen from her seat and was advancing eagerly toward her mate. Bert saw that the man hardly glanced in her direction, so intent was he upon an object over which he stood. The object was a shimmering bowl some eight or ten feet across, which was mounted on a tripod near the observatory, and over whose metallic surface a queer bluish light was playing.

It was a wordless pantomime, the ensuing scene, and Bert watched in amazement. This woman of another race, another age, another plane, was pleading with her man. Sobbing soundlessly, wretchedly. And the man was unheeding, impatient with her demonstrations. He shoved her aside as she attempted to interfere with his manipulations of some elaborate mechanical contrivance at the side of the bowl.

And then there was a sudden roaring vibration, a flash of light leaping from the bowl, and the materialization of a spherical vessel that swallowed up the man and vanished in the shaft of light like a moth in the flame of a candle.

At Bert's side, the Wanderer was a grim and silent figure, misty and unreal when compared with those material, emotion-torn beings of the rooftop. The woman, swooning, had wilted over the rim of the bowl, and the two boys with their strange amphibious pet splashed out from the pool and came running to her, wide-eyed and dripping.

The Wanderer touched a lever and again there was the sensation as of a great page turned across the vastness of the universe. All was hazy and indistinct outside the sphere that held them, with a rushing blur of dimly gray light-forms. Beneath them remained only the bright outline of the bowl, an object distinct and real and fixed in space.

"It was thus I left my loved ones," the Wanderer said hollowly. "In fanatical devotion to my science, but in blind disregard of those things which really mattered. Observe, O Man-Called-Bert, that the bowl is still existent in infra-dimensional space—the gateway I left open to Urtraria. So it remained while I, fool that I was, explored those planes of the fifth dimension that were all around us though we saw and felt them not. Only I had seen, even as your friend Tom has seen. And, like him, I heeded not the menace of the things I had witnessed. We go now to the plane of the metal monsters. Behold!"

The sphere shuddered to the increased power of its hidden motors and another huge page seemed to turn slowly over, lurching sickeningly as it came to rest in the new and material plane of existence. Here, Bert understood now, the structure of matter was entirely different. Atoms were comprised of protons and electrons whirling at different velocities and in different orbits—possibly some of the electrons in reverse direction to those of the atomic structure of matter in Urtraria. And these coexisted with those others in the same relative position in time and in space. Ages before, the thing had happened, and he was seeing it now.

They were in the midst of a forest of conical spires whose sides were of dark glittering stuff that reminded Bert of the crystals of carborundum before pulverizing for commercial use. A myriad of

deep colors were reflected from the sharply pointed piles in the light of a great cold moon that hung low in the heavens above them.

In the half light down there between the circular bases of the cones, weird creatures were moving. Like great earthworms they moved, sluggishly and with writhing contortions of their many-jointed bodies. Long cylindrical things with glistening gray hide, like armor plate and with fearsome heads that reared upward occasionally to reveal the single flaming eye and massive iron jaws each contained. There were riveted joints and levers, wheels and gears that moved as the creatures moved; darting lights that flashed forth from trunnion-mounted cases like the searchlights of a battleship of Earth; great swiveled arms with grappling hooks attached. They were mechanical contrivances—the metal monsters of which the Wanderer had spoken. Whether their brains were comprised of active living cells or whether they were cold, calculating machines of metallic parts, Bert was never to know.

"See, the gateway," the Wanderer was saying. "They are investigating. It is the beginning of the end of Urtraria—all as it occurred in the dim and distant past."

He gripped Bert's arm, pointing a trembling finger, and his face was a terrible thing to see in the eery light of their sphere.

A sharply outlined circle of blue-white appeared down there in the midst of the squirming monsters. The sphere drifted lower and Bert was able to see that a complicated machine was being trundled out from an arched doorway in the base of one of the conical dwellings. It was moved to the edge of the light circle which was the bowl on that rooftop of Urtraria. The same bowl! A force area like that used by

Tom Parker, an area existent in many planes of the fifth dimension simultaneously, an area where the various components of wave motion merged and became as one. The gateway between planes!

The machine of the metal monsters was provided with a huge lens and a reflector, and these were trained on the bowl. Wheels and levers of the machine moved swiftly. There came an orange light from within that was focused upon lens and reflector to strike down and mingle with the cold light of the bowl. A startling transformation ensued, for the entire area within view was encompassed with a milky diffused brightness in which two worlds seemed to intermingle and fuse. There were the rooftops of the city in Urtraria and its magnificent domes, a transparent yet substantial reality superimposed upon the gloomy city of cones of the metal monsters.

"Jupiter!" Bert breathed. "They're going through!"

"They are, Earthling. More accurately, they did—thousands of them; millions." Even as the Wanderer spoke, the metal monsters were wriggling through between the two planes, their enormous bodies moving with menacing deliberation.

On the rooftops back in Urtraria could be seen the frantic, fleeing forms of humanlike beings—the Wanderer's people.

There was a sharp click from the control panel and the scene was blotted out by the familiar maze of geometric shapes, the whirling, dancing light-forms that rushed madly past over the vast arch which spanned infinity.

"Where were you at the time?" asked Bert. Awed by what he had seen and with pity in his heart for the man who had unwittingly let

loose the horde of metal monsters on his own loved ones and his own land, he stared at the Wanderer.

The big man was standing with face averted, hands clutching the rail of the control panel desperately. "I?" he whispered. "I was roaming the planes, exploring, experimenting, immersed in the pursuits that went with my insatiable thirst for scientific data and the broadening of my knowledge of this complex universe of ours. Forgetting my responsibilities. Unknowing, unsuspecting."

"You returned—to your home?"

"Too late I returned. You shall see; we return now by the same route I then followed."

"No!" Bert shouted, suddenly panicky at thought of what might be happening to Joan and Tom in the land of the Bardeks. "No, Wanderer—tell me, but don't show me. I can imagine. Seeing those loathsome big worms of iron and steel, I can well visualize what they did. Come now, have a heart, man; take me to my friends before...."

"Ah-h!" The Wanderer looked up and a benign look came to take the place of the pain and horror which had contorted his features. "It is well, O Man-Called-Bert. I shall do as you request, for I now see that my mission has been well accomplished. We go to your friends, and fear you not that we shall arrive too late."

"Your—your mission?" Bert calmed immediately under the spell of the Wanderer's new mood.

"My mission throughout eternity, Earthling—can't you sense it? Forever and ever I shall roam infra-dimensional space, watching and waiting for evidence that a similar catastrophe might be visited on another land where warm-blooded thinking humans of similar mold to my own may be living out their short lives of happiness or near-happiness. Never again shall so great a calamity come to mankind

anywhere if it be within the Wanderer's power to prevent it. And that is why I snatched you up from your friend's laboratory. That is why I have shown to you the—"

"Me, why me?" Bert exclaimed.

"Attend, O Earthling, and you shall hear."

The mysterious intangibilities of the cosmos whirled by unheeded by either as the Wanderer's tale unfolded.

"When I returned," he said, "the gateway was closed forever. I could not reenter my own plane of existence. The metal monsters had taken possession; they had found a better and richer land than their own, and when they had completed their migration they destroyed the generator of my force area. They had shut me out; but I could visit Urtraria—as an outsider, as a wraith—and I saw what they had done. I saw the desolation and the blackness of my once fair land. I saw that—that none of my own kind remained. All, all were gone.

"For a time my reason deserted me and I roamed infra-dimensional space a madman, self-condemned to the outer realms where there is no real material existence, no human companionship, no love, no comfort. When reason returned, I set myself to the task of visiting other planes where beings of my own kind might be found and I soon learned that it was impossible to do this in the body. To these people I was a ghostly visitant, if they sensed my presence at all, for my roamings between planes had altered the characteristics of atomic structure of my being. I could no longer adapt myself to material existence in these planes of the fifth dimension. The orbits of electrons in the atoms comprising my substance had become fixed in

a new and outcast oscillation interval. I had remained away too long. I was an outcast, a wanderer—the Wanderer of Infinity."

There was silence in the sphere for a space, save only for the gentle whirring of the motors. Then the Wanderer continued:

"Nevertheless, I roamed these planes as a nonexistent visitor in so far as their peoples were concerned. I learned their languages and came to think of them as my own, and I found that many of their scientific workers were experimenting along lines similar to those which had brought disaster to Utraria. I swore a mighty oath to spend my lifetime in warning them, in warding off a repetition of so terrible a mistake as I had made. On several occasions I have succeeded.

"And then I found that my lifetime was to be for all eternity. In the outer realms time stands still, as I have told you, and in the plane of existence which was now mine—an extra-material plane—I had no prospect of aging or of death. My vow, therefore, is for so long as our universe may endure instead of for merely a lifetime. For this I am duly thankful, for I shall miss nothing until the end of time.

"I visited planes where other monsters, as clever and as vicious as the metal ones who devastated Utraria, were bending every effort of their sciences toward obtaining actual contact with other planes of the fifth dimension. And I learned that such contact was utterly impossible of attainment without a gateway in the realm to which they wished to pass—a gateway such as I had provided for the metal monsters and such as that which your friend Tom Parker has provided for the Bardeks, or spider men, as you term them.

"In intra-dimensional space I saw the glow of Tom Parker's force area and I made my way to your world quickly. But Tom could not get my warning: he was too stubbornly and deeply engrossed in the work he was engaged in. The girl Joan was slightly more susceptible, and I believe she was beginning to sense my telepathic messages when

she sent for you. Still and all, I had begun to give up hope when you came on the scene. I took you away just as the spider men succeeded in capturing your friends, and now my hope has revived. I feel sure that my warning shall not have been in vain."

"But," objected Bert, "you've warned *me*, not the scientist of my world who is able to prevent the thing—"

"Yes, *you*," the Wanderer broke in. "It is better so. This Tom Parker is a zealot even as was I—a man of science thinking only of his own discoveries. I am not sure he would discontinue his experiments even were he to receive my warning in all its horrible details. But you, O Man-Called-Bert, through your love of his sister and by your influence over him, will be able to do what I can not do myself: bring about the destruction of this apparatus of his; impress upon him the grave necessity of discontinuing his investigations. You can do it, and you alone, now that you fully understand."

"Sa-ay! You're putting it up to me entirely?"

"Nearly so, and there is no alternative. I believe I have not misjudged you; you will not fail, of that I am certain. For the sake of your own kind, for the love of Joan Parker—you will not fail. And for me—for this small measure of atonement it is permitted that I make or help to make possible—"

"No, I'll not fail. Take me to them, quick." Bert grinned understandingly as the Wanderer straightened his broad shoulders and extended his hand.

There was no lack of substantiality in the mighty grip of those closing fingers.

Again the sphere's invisible motors increased speed, and again the dizzying kaleidoscope of color swept past them more furiously.

"We will now overtake them—your friends," said the Wanderer, "in the very act of passing between planes."

"Overtake them...." Bert mumbled. "I don't get it at all, this time traveling. It's over my head a mile."

"It isn't time travel really," explained the Wanderer. "We are merely closing up the time-space interval, moving to the precise spot in the universe where your friend's laboratory existed at the moment of contact between planes with your world and that of the Bardeks. We shall reach there a few seconds after the actual capture."

"No chance of missing?" Bert watched the Wanderer as he consulted his mathematical data and made new adjustments of the controls.

"Not the slightest; it is calculated to a nicety. We could, if we wished, stop just short of the exact time and would see the re-occurrence of their capture. But only as unseen observers—you can not enter the plane as a material being during your own actual past, for your entity would then be duplicated. Of course, I can not enter in any case. But, moving on to the instant after the event, as we shall do, you may enter either plane as a material being or move between the two planes at will by means of the gateway provided by Tom Parker's force area. Do you not now understand the manner in which you will be enabled to carry out the required procedure?"

"H-hmm!" Bert wasn't sure at all. "But this moving through time," he asked helplessly, "and the change from one plane of oscillation to another—they're all mixed up—what have they to do with each other?"

"All five dimensions of our universe are definitely interrelated and dependent one upon the other for the existence of matter in any form

whatsoever. You see—but here we are."

The motors slowed down and a titanic page seemed to turn over in the cosmos with a vanishing blaze of magnificence. Directly beneath them glowed the disk of blue-white light that was Tom's force area. The sphere swooped down within its influence and came to rest.

"Make haste," the Wanderer said. "I shall be here in the gateway though you see me not. Bring them here, speedily."

On the one side Bert saw familiar objects in Tom's laboratory, on the other side the white cliff and the pitchy sea of the Bardek realm. And the cage of basket-weave between, with his friends inside struggling with the spider men. It was the instant after the capture.

"Joan! Tom!" Bert shouted.

A side of the sphere had opened and he plunged through and into the Bardek plane—to the inky surface of the sea, fully expecting to sink in its forbidding depths. But the stuff was an elastic solid, springy under his feet and bearing him up as would an air-inflated cushion. He threw himself upon the cage and tore at it with his fingers.

The whimpering screams of the spider men were in his ears, and he saw from the corner of his eye that other of the tortoiselike mounds were rising up out of the viscid black depths, dozens of them, and that hundreds of the Bardeks were closing in on him from all directions. Weapons were in their hands, and a huge engine of warfare like a caterpillar tractor was skimming over the sea from the cliff wall with a great grinding and clanking of its mechanisms.

But the cage was pulling apart in his clutches as if made of reeds.

With Joan in one encircling arm he was battling the spider men, driving swift short-arm jabs into their soft bloated bodies with devastating effect. And Tom, recovering from the first surprise of his capture, was doing a good job himself, his flailing arms scattering the Bardeks like ninepins. The Wanderer and his sphere, both doomed to material existence only in infra-dimensional space, had vanished from sight.

A bedlam rose up from the reinforcing hordes as they came in to enter the force area. But Bert sensed the guiding touch of the Wanderer's unseen hand, heard his placid voice urging him, and, in a single wild leap was inside the sphere with the girl.

With Joan safely in the Wanderer's care, he rushed out again for Tom. Then followed a nightmare of battling those twining tentacles and the puffy crowding bodies of the spider men. Wrestling tactics and swinging fists were all that the two Earthlings had to rely upon, but, between them, they managed to fight off a half score of the Bardeks and work their way back into the glowing force area.

"It's no use," Tom gasped. "We can't get back."

"Sure we can. We've a friend—here—in the force area."

Tom Parker staggered: his strength was giving out. "No, no, Bert," he moaned, "I can't. You go on. Leave me here."

"Not on your life!" Bert swung him up bodily into the sphere as he contacted with the invisible metal of its hull. Kicking off the nearest of the spider men, he clambered in after the scientist.

The tableau then presented in the sphere's interior was to remain

forever imprinted on Bert's memory, though it was only a momentary flash in his consciousness at the time: the Wanderer, calm and erect at the control panel, his benign countenance alight with satisfaction; Tom Parker, pulling himself to his feet, clutching at the big man's free arm, his mouth opened in astonishment; Joan, seated at the Wanderer's feet with awed and reverent eyes upturned.

There is no passing directly between the planes. One must have the force area as a gateway, and, besides, a medium such as the cage of the Bardeks, the orange light of the metal monsters, or the sphere of the Wanderer. Bert knew this instinctively as the sphere darkened and the flashing light-forms leaped across the blackness.

The motors screamed in rising crescendo as their speed increased. Then, abruptly, the sound broke off into deathly silence as the limit of audibility was passed. Against the brilliant background of swift color changes and geometric light-shapes that so quickly merged into the familiar blur, Bert saw his companions as dim wraithlike forms. He moved toward Joan, groping.

Then came the tremendous thump, the swinging of a colossal page across the void, the warping of the very universe about them, the physical torture and the swift rush through Stygian inkiness....

"Farewell." A single word, whispered like a benediction in the Wanderer's mellow voice, was in Bert's consciousness. He knew that their benefactor had slipped away into the mysterious regions of intra-dimensional space.

Raising himself slowly and dazedly from where he had been flung, he saw they were in Tom's laboratory. Joan lay over there white and

still, a pitiful crumpled heap. Panicky, Bert crossed to her. His trembling fingers found her pulse; a sobbing breath of relief escaped his lips. She had merely swooned.

Tom Parker, exhausted from his efforts in that other plane and with the very foundations of his being wrenched by the passage through the fifth dimension, was unable to rise. Only semiconscious, his eyes were glazed with pain, and incoherent moaning sounds came from his white lips when he attempted to speak.

Bert's mind was clearing rapidly. That diabolical machine of Tom's was still operating, the drone of its motors being the only sound in the laboratory as the inventor closed his mouth grimly and made a desperate effort to raise his head. But Bert had seen shapes materializing on the lighted disk that was the gateway between planes and he rushed to the controls of the instrument. That starting lever must be shifted without delay.

"Don't!" Tom Parker had found his voice; his frantic warning was a hoarse whistling gasp. He had struggled to his knees. "It will kill you, Bert. Those things in the force area—partly through—the reaction will destroy the machine and all of us if you turn it off. Don't, I say!"

"What then?" Bert fell back appalled. Hazily, the steel prow of a war machine was forming itself on the metal disk; caterpillar treads moved like ghostly shadows beneath. It was the vanguard of the Bardek hordes!

"Can't do it that way!" Tom had gotten to his feet and was stumbling toward the force area. "Only one way—during the change of oscillation periods. Must mingle other atoms with those before they stabilize in our plane. Must localize annihilating force. Must—"

What was the fool doing? He'd be in the force area in another moment. Bert thrust forward to intercept him; saw that Joan had

regained consciousness and was sitting erect, swaying weakly. Her eyes widened with horror as they took in the scene and she screamed once despairingly and was on her feet, tottering.

"Back!" Tom Parker yelled, wheeling. "Save yourselves."

Bert lunged toward him but was too late. Tom had already burst into the force area and cast himself upon the semitransparent tank of the spider men. A blast of searing heat radiated from the disk and the motors of Tom's machine groaned as they slowed down under a tremendous overload.

Joan cried out in awful despair and moved to follow, but her knees gave way beneath her. Moaning and shuddering, she slumped into Bert's arms and he drew her back from the awful heat of the force area.

Then, horrified, they watched as Tom Parker melted into the misty shape of the Bardek war machine. Swiftly his body merged with the half-substance of the tank and became an integral part of the mass. For a horrible instant Tom, too, was transparent—a ghost shape writhing in a ghostly throbbing mechanism of another world. His own atomic structure mingled with that of the alien thing and yet, for a moment, he retained his Earthly form. His lean face was peaceful in death, satisfied, like the Wanderer's when they had last seen him.

A terrific thunderclap rent the air and a column of flame roared up from the force area. Tom's apparatus glowed to instant white heat, then melted down into sizzling liquid metal and glass. The laboratory was in sudden twilight gloom, save for the tongue of fire that licked up from the force area to the paneled ceiling. On the metal disk, now

glowing redly, was no visible thing. The gateway was closed forever.

What more fearful calamity might have befallen had the machine been switched off instead, Bert was never to know. Nor did he know how he reached his parked flivver with Joan a limp sobbing bundle in his arms. He only knew that Tom Parker's sacrifice had saved them, had undoubtedly prevented a horrible invasion of Earth; and that the efforts of the Wanderer had not been in vain.

The old house was burning furiously when he climbed in under the wheel of his car. He held Joan very close and watched that blazing funeral pyre in wordless sorrow as the bereaved girl dropped her head to his shoulder.

A group of men came up the winding road, a straggling group, running—the loungers from the village. In the forefront was the beardless youth who had directed Bert, and, bringing up the rear, limping and scurrying, was the old man they had called Gramp. He was puffing prodigiously when the others gathered around the car, demanding information.

And the old fellow with the thick spectacles talked them all down.

"What'd I tell you?" he screeched. "Didn't I say they was queer doin's up here? Didn't I say the devil was here with his imps—an' the thunder? You're a passel o' idjits like I said—"

The roar of Bert's starting motor drowned out the rest, but the old fellow was still gesticulating and dancing about when they clattered off down the winding road to Lenville.

An hour later Joan had fallen asleep, exhausted.

Night had fallen and, as mile after mile of smooth concrete unrolled beneath the flivver's wheels, Bert gave himself over to thoughts he had not dared to entertain in nearly two years. They'd be happy, he and Joan, and there'd be no further argument. If she still objected to living on the fruit farm, that could be managed easily. They'd live in Indianapolis and he'd buy a new car, a good one, to run back and forth. If, when her grief for Tom had lessened, she wanted to go on with laboratory work and such—well, that was easy, too. Only there would be no fooling around with this dimensional stuff—she'd had enough of that, he knew.

He drew her close with his free arm and his thoughts shifted—moved far out in infra-dimensional space to dwell upon the man of the past who had called himself Wanderer of Infinity. He who would go on and on until the end of time, until the end of all things, watching over the many worlds and planes. Warning peoples of humanlike mold and emotions wherever they might dwell. Helping them. Atoning throughout infinity. Suffering.

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