

The Man Who Stopped the Earth

By HENRY J. KOSTKOS

This story, by one of the recent acquisitions to what we may call our staff of authors, is very short, but will be enjoyed greatly by our readers. There is much art in the production of a very short story to make it a true narration and bring it to a crisp ending. Our author has certainly succeeded in keeping up what used to be called the unities and brings about a good climax.

SOLEMNLy the three grey-bearded old men filed through the door into the dim interior of the laboratory. The grim lines on their faces did not relax as they gathered around the amazing combination of coils, wires, motors, tanks and tubes that filled the large room in studied disorder. The bluish glow from a mercury vapor lamp illuminated the meter dials on the dull black switchboard and cast a weird tint over the wrinkled faces of the three scientists. A musty odor, that might have come from a newly opened tomb, hung like a blanket of death over the scene.

As his stooped frame bent low over the galvanometer of the electron gun Markrum said:

"There is much danger, Rizzurt, in performing the Great Experiment."

The man he addressed pushed his long hawk-like features close to Markrum's face. His eyes were alive with a thousand pinpoint of fire and his sallow skin reddened into an angry flush.

"Did I not tell you that not a single inhabitant of the earth will be harmed? Must I repeat the test over and over again to convince you? Wirrtel has no childish doubts, why should you have any?"

Wirrtel looked sidelong at Markrum, his white beard sweeping across his chest.

"Rizzurt is right. I have no doubts. But to convince yourself, make your own tests."

Markrum dropped his head in resignation. With a heavy heart he started the small high-tension generators which lit up the tubes of the atom isolagraph. There was a silvery tinkle of broken glass as his nervous old hand knocked over a small flask, then taking a grip on himself he dexterously made a series of adjustments.

Then he straightened up and shuffled towards the control board, the nails in his shoes scraping audibly over the tiles of the laboratory floor. Rapidly he threw a switch in and out and swiftly read the oscillating needle on the galvanometer dial. Each reading he entered in a scrawly hand on a pad of paper, while his two colleagues watched with glaring impatience.

Finally Markrum was satisfied. He sat down at a bench, and lost himself in intricate calculations. The two waited but said nothing. Then Markrum glanced up; his voice was harshly discordant:

"I have repeated your experiment, Rizzurt. Much of your wave atomic theory I am in perfect agreement with. But there is a serious error in your atom equation. The complex quantity ψ that you interpret as . . ."

"Enough of your insults, Markrum. How dare you make me out as an incompetent dabbler? I am the great scientist Kirkland Rizzurt; take care how you speak to me," he bellowed, his beard bristling as he thrust his chin pugnaciously towards the other. Then with a toss of his head he added defiantly. "The Great Experiment will take place at once! I have locked the door; you cannot get out."

Rizzurt stood upright under the mercury vapor lamp, his face sinister with a fanatic light. Then like one pronouncing a sentence of doom he shouted above the banging of the shutter as the night wind outside whistled under the eaves of the frame building. A flash of lightning foretold the coming of a storm and distant thunder rumbled menacingly above the tearing of the wind.

"There must be no further delay. The time for the Great Experiment has come. I WILL NOW STOP THE EARTH!"

MARKRUM'S rheumatic old frame shivered as if he were cold. Wirrtel tightened his grasp on the edge of the laboratory table; beyond this he showed no emotion. But Rizzurt had been transformed into a creature of eyes, great fiery red, flaming, fanatic orbs; they became quizzical, inquiring, more rational, then pleading, as the man lowered himself heavily to a stool, more like a tired old man, weary of the world, burned out, unhappy . . .

"Ah, Markrum, Markrum, if you would only understand. Here in our hands we have the means of doing a wonderful thing. Our earth moves in a complex path; it rotates, travels in its orbit around the sun, the sun carries us through the galactic system, the galactic system speeds us amid the spiral nebulae . . . How fast are we going, what is our destination, what is gravity, can we exist outside of the orbit of the sun? These questions—think, man, just think—these problems, these unknowns, we can now answer."

By this time the storm outside raged with fury. The laboratory was lit up brilliantly by flashes of lightning. The three old men instinctively drew closer together.

Then Markrum said quietly with resignation, "You are right, Rizzurt. We are old men. All our lives we have labored with you to find the answer. And we grow older; see how my hand shakes as those minute cells of muscle and nerves become feeble, and are soon to die. We are not long for this world. Now I also say that the Great Experiment must be performed!"

He sat down heavily. The other two nodded their heads silently, sympathetically. With a quick practiced hand, Rizzurt pushed some buttons. In the distance the solenoid-operated remote-control switches responded. Then the great generators below began to hum ponderously. Another series of switches operated and the row of giant tubes glowed fiery red. Rizzurt drew a test arc fifty feet long, and the air was filled with the pungent odor of ozone.

Wirrtel scrutinized the meters through his silver rimmed spectacles.

"The voltage is constant, Rizzurt, and the tubes are all behaving beautifully. Now—any time—you can apply the Atomic Brake," he informed his chief.

"GOOD. The instruments that will measure our speed and direction of motion are

ready. They will register as soon as I throw this switch, which will indicate that in this universe of billions of stars and planets, that tiny speck we call the earth, has stopped in its mad flight to nowhere and is content to view the aimless motions of the others," Rizzurt said philosophically.

Now, as if the elements had of a sudden become aware of these mites of men who were bold enough to tamper with the secrets of the universe, the crashing of thunder died away in a sullen rumble. The wind became soft and whining. The black thunder clouds passed swiftly across the face of the piteous white moon.

Markrum moved to the window and looked out. The clash of the last switch did not disturb him as he gazed out over a landscape now made luminous by the light of the moon. He could hear Rizzurt's labored breathing as the man bent low over his instruments.

Then without warning the orb of the moon streaked like a flash across the sky! Markrum gave a low cry and clutched his head; he was dizzy. But when he turned suddenly towards his companions he felt eased, his head did not bother him nor did his eyes. He looked outside again.

The moon was gone! And in the sky thousands of points of light had become streaks of fire!

"We have done it! We have done it! The movement of the earth is ceasing! All the stars and planets of the universe are rushing madly by. See, here on this dial." Rizzurt's voice was hoarse and the words came from his mouth, as if after great effort.

With a cry Markrum slumped to the floor. He had seen! That which he had feared had come true. The solid walls of the laboratory were crumbling into fine dust! The metal column against which his head was resting had become soft and yielding. And with horror he realized that the very flesh of his hands was wasting away, even as he gazed at them with slowly dimming eyes. He tried to see his companions; though they were but a few feet distant they were beyond the range of his vision.

"Rizzurt, Wirrtel," he called in a hoarse whisper for his throat was dry and it was agony to speak. Yet he knew that it was too late.

As if from far off came the faint answer. Was it Rizzurt's voice, or was it the voice of his own soul? He would never know. But he heard it, and with calm satisfaction he listened, listened as the roof of the laboratory crumbled and crashed down upon

him, as the very floor under him became powder, as the earth itself trembled violently and slowly crumbled into dust.

“Markrum. Markrum, you were right! Did you not warn me that the atom obeyed but one law? That the atoms and the electrons are kept within their orbits by electromagnetic force that is generated only when all matter, everything in the universe, is hurling through the magnetic field of space at incredible speeds. What happens when you stop turning an electric generator? The magnetic forces cease and there is no current generated. It is thus likewise with the earth.

“You have truly evolved a stupendous theory. And I have unwittingly proved it for you, though there be none left to profit by it.”

Then as Markrum’s old body shriveled until nothing but the eyes seemed to be alive, those eyes flashed out for the last time over the world that had ceased to be. Those eyes had looked upon the breaking down of matter into its molecules, then the molecules became atoms, and as the chemicals

of his flesh and bone united with the soft plastic substance that was once the earth and the fullness thereof, these atoms broke into their constituent protons and electrons and then like a puff of smoke under the open sky, these charges, too, ceased to be.

Where the planet earth was but a few minutes before, now there was nothing but void.

FAR out in interstellar space, beyond the galaxy of stars that included the solar system, an observer might have witnessed a strange and inexplicable phenomenon. Not that the complete annihilation of such a minute speck as the earth would have been noticeable at such a great distance, but a star, the Sun, changed its position in the constellation of which it was a part and assumed a new location, while its solar system unbalanced by the loss of a planet, sought erratically to heal its wound. For the cosmic systems must balance.

THE END