

In his radio programs Murder by Experts and The Mysterious Traveler (for which he recently received his second "Edgar" award from Mystery Writers of America), Robert Arthur is compelled to restrict himself to grim and grisly writing — which is, we think, a most deplorable state of affairs. Competent merchants of grimness are not uncommon; but the Arthur gift for plausible absurdity is a rare and enviable one, as you already know from such stories as Postpaid to Paradise. Here we offer another revival of a delightful Arthur fantasia from Argosy, this time with a wacky science fiction slant — and a plea to radio producers to turn him loose on creating such humorous improbabilia for the millions who now know him only as a murdermonger.

The Universe Broke Down

by ROBERT ARTHUR

I WISH I knew exactly how to describe Jeremiah Jupiter. The truth is, I don't know whether he's the world's most brilliant scientific mind or whether he's cracked worse than the Liberty Bell.

I once read a story about a baseball pitcher who could throw the most eccentric curves, because he was a refugee from a strait jacket and that was the way his mind worked — in eccentric curves. Sometimes I think that's the case with Jeremiah Jupiter. That he doesn't think so much as let his mind jump around inside his skull like a Mexican jumping bean on a hot griddle.

But there's no use trying to analyze Jupiter for you. He's a wealthy amateur dabbler in advanced science, with money enough to buy a ton of radium, and therefore no interest whatever in making more money. He's given to enthusiasms in which he'll work years if necessary to develop an idea, but the enthusiasms sometimes go just as fast as they come. He may spend a year developing a gadget, and then lose interest in it just as it's on the point of perfection.

Since I've known him he's made some of the most outstanding scientific developments, but I have acquired a certain allergy to Jeremiah Jupiter and his discoveries. They have a bad habit of going wrong, somehow; and nine times out of ten, I'm the one they go wrong on.

Consequently, when he called me up one morning last June and said he

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wanted me to go up to Bear Mountain with him to try out his newest scientific miracle, I said no, loudly and firmly. Then I groaned, got up — it was Sunday morning and I'd planned to sleep late — and got dressed. Twenty minutes later Jeremiah Jupiter was outside my apartment house in his big V-16 sedan, honking.

Swallowing my still-hot coffee and burning myself in the process, I put on my new twenty-dollar Panama and went down. I fancied that I looked pretty dressy, in a beige linen suit, cerulean blue tie, and new hat. But Jupiter took no notice of my appearance.

He himself, behind the wheel of the V-16, looked as usual: as if he'd stolen the clothes off a scarecrow and slept in them. But his cheeks were pink and his blue eyes bright behind the powerful horn-rims he was forced to wear, and his blond hair lay back on his skull with a neat wave to it. Being small and inclined to plumpness — eating was his only non-scientific passion — he looked more like a cherub than like a scientific menace.

"Lucius!" he said happily, as if he were doing me a tremendous favor. "Jump in! I can't wait!"

As if echoing him, a cat made a fierce spitting noise in the back of the car, and a dog growled with savage fury. That provoked a rat-like squeaking, and I glanced uneasily into the rear seat to see what Jeremiah Jupiter had back there.

I saw a mélange of objects that only Jupiter could have found a collective use for. The spitting came from a tremendous, tawny alley cat with one ear in rags and an eye gouged out in some back-fence battle, penned up in a box. The growling came from a Great Dane trying to get out of a slatted crate to reach the cat. The squeaking issued from a cage of six large white rats.

On the seat lay an Indian tomahawk, a tournament bow and quiver of arrows, an elephant gun, a driver and six golf balls, and a basket that looked as if it contained lunch.

"Jumping jellyfish!" I exclaimed, as Jupiter let in the clutch and we went from a dead stop to thirty miles an hour. "What" — I had to hold onto my new Panama, for he had the top down — "what in seven kinds of thunder are you going to do with those things? Are you going to massacre a rival, play archery, golf, or apply for admission at Mattewan?"

"Lucius," Jeremiah Jupiter told me in the tone of bubbling excitement that always preceded his first tryout of a new gadget — on me, usually — "that gun is going to fire the shot heard 'round the universe."

"Around the world, you mean," I told him. "That's how the quotation goes."

"This gun," Jupiter insisted, "is going to fire the shot heard 'round the

universe. The other things I grabbed up because they were handy, in the lab and the game room."

After that he was busy driving, for even with the new four-lane highways the roads toward Bear Mountain were crowded, and I couldn't talk because I was constantly out of breath gasping at the near misses. Jupiter wouldn't buy one of the new Hummingbird planes that flew backwards, sideways, forwards or straight up; he said they were too dangerous!

Finally I just shut my eyes, to give my nerves a chance to unjangle, and didn't open them again until Jupiter said cheerfully, "Well, Lucius, here we are!"

Then I found we'd turned up a side road. We were now parked at the end of a rough trail fifty feet below the crest of one of Bear Mountain's companion peaks. It was a wild section, and we were completely alone.

"Now," Jupiter told me brightly, hopping out and dragging crates, cages and suitcases out of the rear, "all we have to do is to take these things to the top and we're ready."

I protested, but as usual it did no good. Presently I found myself staggering up a crude trail, loaded down like a pack mule, while Jupiter trotted ahead conveying two suitcases.

Letting me bring up everything else — including the wolfish Great Dane, which I let out of the crate and dragged up on the end of a leash — he set himself to making ready some apparatus from the suitcases.

Presently I had everything — dog, cat, rats, gun, bow, arrows, golf club, a tomahawk, and lunch — assembled on the flat space, about a hundred feet square, that was the top of the peak. Then I bitterly asked Jupiter if he wanted me to go back to bring up the car too, but he shook his head, unaware of the sarcasm.

"We won't need it, Lucius," he said vaguely, "although it's good of you to offer. Now let's see . . . yes, everything's ready, and the exercise has given me quite an appetite. I believe we'll lunch before we do any experimenting."

The exercise had given *him* an appetite! I laughed harshly, but he was still oblivious to my efforts to insult him, and I had to give up and start eating if I wanted any of the lunch.

For Jeremiah Jupiter was very fond of food, and his Javanese boy put up a lunch that the Waldorf-Plaza would have kept under glass on exhibit as something special. And after engulfing some terrapin, a couple of squabs, and a few other tidbits from the vacuum-heater lunch hamper, I felt in a more kindly mood.

We tossed the scraps to the cat and dog, which I had tied to pines some distance apart, and they downed them greedily, then returned to their spitting and snarling. The rats in the cage at our feet crouched fearfully.

"Now, Lucius," Jeremiah Jupiter announced, "I'll tell you what we're here for. You are going to witness the first outdoor demonstration of the short-circuiting of space!"

I blinked at him. Taking for granted that I wasn't going to understand, he was already explaining.

"I mean," he said largely, making a grandiloquent gesture toward the horizon, "I propose to show you that I can eliminate space between two points by by-passing it. By detouring around it! So that if you wished to move from this peak to that one over there" — he pointed at another, slightly lower summit, a quarter of a mile away — "you could take but a step — and be there. Do I make myself clear?"

"I understand what you mean," I told him, "but I don't believe it's possible. And in any case, *I'm not going to try it!*"

"Hanh!" Jupiter snorted. "You don't believe it's possible, eh? Just for that, ten years from now when you want to go any place *via* the Jeremiah Jupiter Space-pass Transit Company, you'll have to pay your way. And I was going to give you a lifetime Annie Oakley, too.

"It'll be the biggest thing the world has ever seen — wipe out railroads, automobiles, shipping, airplanes, and rockets. We'll have an office, with hundreds of booths. You'll step into one marked *Paris*, for example — and there you are, on the Rue de la Paix! Or into the Waikiki entrance — and come out on the beach, ready for a plunge."

He sobered thoughtfully.

"That is," he qualified, "if we can discover more meteor-magna."

"Making no mention of the horrible economic panic, with millions starving to death due to the collapse of two or three of the world's leading industries if all this comes about," I told him sardonically — "just what is meteor-magna?"

"This." From one of the open suitcases Jupiter took a chunk of spongy stuff, gray and porous. "It was found in that meteor that plunged into Mexico last year. The Government sold it to my agents; you know they have instructions to buy for me at any price any new scientific find, whatever its nature.

"It's the heart and soul of my apparatus for short-circuiting the spatial dimension: for — to make a crude analogy in an effort to get the whole thing clear inside your unscientific mind — drilling a hole sideways through space.

"I'll give you an example. Suppose two ants are on a sheet of paper — a two-dimensional world. Suppose they're on opposite sides of the paper, and want to join each other. One of them will have to crawl clear across the sheet, over the edge, and clear back on the other side. That's equivalent to

traveling distance, or through space, in our three-dimensional world. "But suppose one of the ants invents an apparatus for drilling a hole in the paper, through which it can crawl in an instant to join the other. That would be equivalent to my Spatial By-pass apparatus, which utilizes a pseudo-fourth dimension of its own creation to make it possible to move from one spot to another without traversing the intervening distance. Now I trust everything is clear?"

"As clear as it ever will be," I growled. "Let's see you make good."

He had already set the suitcases in the center of the open space. One was open, showing a control panel. A wire ran from the panel to a small black box like a battery, and another cable ran to a cone-shaped directional antenna about the size and shape of an old-fashioned electric heater.

Now Jupiter took a handful of meteor-magna from the second suitcase, put it into a metal cylinder at the base of the control panel, and straightened.

"All ready," he pronounced, with customary self-confidence. "This battery is really a cosmic ray trap. It catches and amplifies cosmic rays, feeds them into the magna-chamber, where the magna disintegrates to give what I'm going to call the Jupiter Fourth-dimensional effect.

"The antenna there is gyroscopically stabilized to hold steady on its focus. You could tip it over, and it would still radiate in the right direction. So no danger of accidents. I'm not taking any chances this time, Lucius."

He beamed at me, and turned a knob, then clicked a switch. The directional antenna began to glow with a cold violet light. Nothing else occurred.

"Well?" I asked. "Now what?"

"Now, my dear Lucius, you shall fire the shot heard 'round infinity," Jupiter crowed. "You pride yourself upon being an expert shot. There's the gun. Can you see that white, dead limb upon that tree over there?"

He pointed to a dead oak atop the adjacent summit, perhaps five hundred yards away.

"I dare say you can hit it without trouble? You're an experienced marksman. You know the time that should elapse between the shot and the bullet's striking the target. On this occasion, I venture, you will see the branch shatter almost before you've pulled the trigger, as the bullet by-passes the intervening distance through my spatial short circuit."

The branch was large, and the gun had telescopic sights. The shot was child's play. I swung the gun to my shoulder and fired. The line of the shot was directly over the glowing antenna.

Nothing happened.

My lips tight, for I was a bit vain of my ability as a rifleman, I took more careful aim, centered the old limb exactly, and fired.

Still nothing happened.

"Lucius!" Jupiter exclaimed angrily, "you're missing on purpose. Here, give me the gun."

He took it from me and fired. Still nothing occurred. Rapidly he emptied all five remaining cartridges, without once hitting the oak or anything else.

A trifle downcast, Jupiter gave me back the gun.

"Something must be wrong with the sights," he muttered. "However, we've plenty of other tests. Suppose we try the golf balls next. You're an ardent sportsman — if you devoted as much time to work as you do to playing with guns, clubs, balls, and rackets, you'd be a very rich man. Have you ever driven a golf ball five hundred yards? A handy achievement, if you could do it in a match, eh? Well, tee up those balls and see how it feels."

Sceptically, I teed the balls on small sand mounds, six inches apart, and took a stance, wagging the driver.

"Now," Jeremiah Jupiter directed, "hit one for all you're worth."

I obeyed, there was a satisfying click, and the ball zinged off the clubhead like a rocket. For about forty feet I could follow its flight and then — directly beyond the glowing antenna — it vanished.

"Now watch!" Jupiter crowed. "It'll be bouncing off that mountain in a sec —"

His mouth closed on the unfinished word. The ball didn't bounce off anything. It never reappeared. Begining to look a trifle distracted, Jupiter told me to drive the rest. I did. Each of the five acted as the first had — vanished and did not reappear.

Jupiter's lips were a tight line.

"Hmmm!" he mumbled to himself. "Wonder if I could have the power turned too high? Maybe those golf balls are coming down in San Francisco, or bouncing off a Tibetan Lama about now. Let's see now . . ."

He fiddled with the dials on the panel, then rejoined me.

"Hand me that tomahawk," he directed. "It's large, and easy to see. This time we'll *watch*. . ."

We watched. And saw — nothing. The tomahawk, an authentic Apache war weapon, sailed through the air, heading for the edge of the cliff, and was gone from sight as abruptly as a turned-out light.

Jupiter shook his head and readjusted the dials. Then he took up the bow and arrow.

"Please watch carefully, Lucius," he instructed, rather more than a little snappishly. "I'm going to aim for that tree. I've shortened the Spatial Bypass to the utmost. It *must* cease short of that summit."

He drew the bow, sighted, released the bowstring. It twanged. The arrow sped away; straight, graceful, a long silver shaft shimmering in the sun. It went into that space of nothingness — and did not come out again.

One by one Jupiter shot off the whole dozen arrows. But the result remained unaltered, and, after having launched them all out of the here into the nowhere, he mopped his brow.

"I shot an arrow into the air," I quoted with sardonic emphasis. "It fell to earth, I knew not where." I hope you aren't scaring any Turks out of their tarbooshes, Jupiter, or pinking any unhappy pigs on a Swiss mountainside."

"This is no joking matter," Jeremiah Jupiter murmured weakly. "I'm — I'm not sure, Lucius, that those arrows, bullets, golf balls or tomahawk even stopped on earth. They — they may be scaring some poor inhabitant of Titan to death this instant — Saturn is in that direction. Or even an unfortunate inhabitant of the Rigel system. Though, of course, with all space ahead of them, they're not *likely* to hit anyone. Still —

"But I have one more idea. Let me have the rats."

I handed him the white rats. He moved up very close to the glowing antenna, and opened the cage.

"I'm going to let one crawl into the By-pass," he muttered to me. "Maybe, if it isn't traveling fast . . ."

But he was doomed to disappointment. About those rats going any place slowly, that is. As he reached in to take it out, it nipped his fingers — excited and nervous, no doubt, because of the proximity of the cat and dog.

Jupiter yelled and dropped the cage. The rats came tumbling out at his feet; and the frantic alley cat pulled free from the tree I'd tied her to and shot like a comet across the rock after the rats.

That was too much for the Great Dane. With a yowl it gave one tremendous lunge and broke its leash. It took out after the cat. And the rats left for parts unknown. Definitely unknown.

Squeaking, they scuttled forward. Sounding a jungle hunting cry, the alley cat streaked after them. Growling, the dog went after the cat. A rapidly moving procession of hunters and hunted, they all passed between Jeremiah Jupiter's legs, upending him to the rock and — rats leading, cat coming up in the stretch, dog making a bid at the final pole — charged straight into the By-pass. And were gone.

After some seconds, Jupiter got to his feet. Both of us stared at the spot where the creatures had whisked off into nothingness.

"I wonder if the cat will catch the rats — or the dog catch the cat — wherever they are now?" Jupiter murmured.

"They — Hey!" I yelled in wild alarm, interrupting myself as a hornet-like object buzzed past my ear. "Somebody's shooting at us!"

"Nonsense!" Jeremiah Jupiter told me. "This is New York State. Nobody shoots at strangers. *Oof!*"

He dropped flat on his face as something hummed past his nose. I joined him when a third bullet zipped past my ear. Lying there, we heard five more shots go overhead.

"There — there ought to be a law against that," Jupiter said, shaken. "But I didn't hear any shots."

Neither had I. Though I hadn't thought about it. I was about to say something — I've forgotten what — when something much larger, with a whitish sheen, whisked by as I was about to sit up.

It was followed by five more, and I knew what they were. Golf balls!

"Oh, my goodness!" Jupiter was murmuring, pressing himself flat against the rock. "Oh, my goodness. *Look out! There it comes!*"

It was a large Indian tomahawk that went by overhead, turning end over end, and followed the golf balls into nothingness in the By-pass.

Then in swift succession twelve arrows sliced past, cutting the wind with a thin, keening noise that chilled our blood. I miscounted, and when eleven had gone by, started to sit up. Something plucked at my brand new twenty-dollar Panama; I saw it whisking away with an arrow through it, and before I could even start to reach for it, it was gone.

"Quick, now!" Jupiter gasped. "Over here. By the trees. Out of the line."

I scrambled after him, and didn't venture to sit up until we reached the trees. My hat was gone, my new linen suit ripped, and I was pretty sore. But I didn't have time to upbraid him.

For as I sat up, directly in front of us six white rats burst out of nowhere and scampered desperately across the rock, followed by a cat whose legs blurred with speed as she tried to catch them, and a giant dog lunging after the cat's tail, not three feet from his nose. Zip — zip — zip — they hurtled across the rock and into the By-pass and were gone again.

But not before the racing dog had brushed against the suitcase that held Jeremiah Jupiter's supply of meteor-magna. It toppled over and began to slide down a slope.

"No!" Jupiter cried out in horror. "My meteor-magna!"

He leaped up and dashed for the suitcase. He almost got it, but not quite. His efforts ended only by giving it a shove that sped it down into the area of the By-pass, and so from sight. And Jupiter, overbalanced by his lunge, followed it.

I was too late to do anything. One instant there he was, frantically trying to keep his feet, his arms waving, his legs working, his mouth opening and closing; and then — there he wasn't.

I was alone, with the remaining suitcase and the glowing antenna.

It was lucky for Jeremiah Jupiter that I do take sports seriously. Among

other accomplishments, I can rope. I hurried down to the car, got out the tow-rope, and ran back up, making a loop of sorts in it.

Then I waited. In fifteen minutes — I timed it — the procession came by again. Bullets snarled, golf balls whizzed, tomahawk hummed, arrows keened past and off again. Then came the six white rats, still holding their distance, with the cat trying to close the gap and the dog trying to snaffle the cat. Zing-zing-zing; and once more they were gone.

Then the suitcase came sliding over the rocks, struck a snag, bounced aside, went over the cliff, and fell hundreds of feet into the Hudson River. I couldn't do anything to stop it. I was waiting for Jupiter.

Last of all he popped abruptly out of invisibility, staggering forward still, arms and legs still working, mouth still open, seeming not to have moved a muscle since he had vanished a quarter of an hour before.

I swung the noose. It fell over his shoulders, and I snubbed against a pine. Jupiter brought up with a jerk and flopped to the rock, dazed, knocking over his apparatus. It slid a few feet and fell into a deep crevice near the edge of the cliff, dragging the small antenna after it. But the gyroscope base kept the antenna pointing as it had been, and I could see it still glowing, a dozen feet down, indicating the By-pass was still there.

I couldn't reach it, however, and anyway, I had enough to do to revive Jupiter and get the wind back into him.

"How long was I gone?" he gasped. I told him, and he looked reflective.

"To me," he stated, "it was no time at all. It was instantaneous. No more than the wink of an eye. And to think" — for a moment he was deeply thoughtful — "to think that I made a complete circuit of the universe in a quarter of an hour. Infinity and back in fifteen minutes!"

He drew in a deep breath.

"Because that's what happened, Lucius," he told me. "I've just figured it out. I *thought* I hitched that wire to the *wrong* connection last night. But something distracted me, and I forgot to change it. So today I got a short circuit. Instead of a controlled By-pass, I was getting full power, and as nearly a total By-pass as the apparatus was capable of. Lucius, do you realize that I came within thirty feet of by-passing all of infinity?"

"Yes, Lucius," he said, as the bullets began cracking past us for the third time. "Those objects are circling the entire universe every fifteen minutes. Naturally, since space is curved, they return to their starting point, whisk through the gap of thirty feet of real space unaffected by my pseudo fourth dimension, and are off again into infinity."

The dog, cat, and rats scuttled past now, still holding their positions.

"As their total spatial travel is only thirty feet each circuit," Jeremiah Jupiter observed, "they may continue their universal circumnavigation for

quite some time. Let's work it out. Say the cat and dog will run for three or four miles. Thirty feet into about twenty-one thousand goes seven hundred times. They should, then, pass by about seven hundred times before exhaustion stops them — unless, of course, the dog catches the cat, or the cat catches the rats, before then.

"The arrows, golf balls and tomahawk will cease much sooner. But the high-power rifle bullets will continue going by as long as or longer than the cat and dog. For a week at least, I should say."

As he finished speaking, the whole assemblage began its fourth trip — or should I say fourth lap? — past us. I was forced to admit that what he said sounded reasonable. After all, space *is* curved. And all the science I ever learned held that you would return to your starting point if you kept going long enough. Jeremiah Jupiter had just succeeded in reducing the round-trip time, that was all.

"But aren't you going to stop it?" I asked. "Recover the apparatus and switch it off?"

Reflectively Jeremiah, after peering briefly into the cavity, shook his head.

"To get down there, you will observe," he stated, "one would have to come within — er, range. I don't think I care to do that again. And the meteor-magna is lost. Probably we could never locate it again. So the apparatus would be useless.

"No, Lucius, I can see many disadvantages now to my scheme to by-pass space. It was brilliant, of course, but impractical. Difficult to control; and anyway, human beings do quite enough traveling about as it is. It is bad for their nervous systems, and I am inclined to think it gives them peptic ulcers. I will just let the whole affair run down in its natural course."

He paused a moment, as still again the frantic rats, eager cat, and madly straining dog hurried by and disappeared.

"You know, Lucius," he murmured, staring at the point where they had winked out, "a philosopher would make something of that single-minded chase around infinity, hunter and hunted, running and running and never getting anywhere. I think there's probably a moral in it some place."

And that was that. All the way back to town, both of us were silent. I'd lost my hat and ruined my clothes, but that's getting off lightly from one of Jeremiah Jupiter's experiments.

As for Jupiter, I thought he was regretting the loss of a machine that might have had world-shaking consequences. But when he dropped me off at my apartment, he only said:

"I do hope nobody goes up there to look at the view. Until after next Sunday, anyway. It would make me feel very bad to pick up the paper and read I had killed somebody with a bullet fired a week before."