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Title: Circle of Flight

Author: Richard Stockham

Release Date: June 18, 2010 [EBook #32885]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Dianna Adair and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

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Thorus, the vengeful, had determined his way. Aria, the healer, had determined her way. Which determined this classic meeting of the twain.

CIRCLE OF FLIGHT

By Richard E. Stockham

Illustrated by Ed Emsch

IT SEEMED they had argued for years as they were arguing tonight. The man paced back and forth chain-smoking cigarettes; the woman sat motionless, watching him. They glanced at their watches with fearful eyes. They heard, with acutely alert ears, the goings and comings of people in the hall; heard the shattering blast of rockets in the sky above the city. And they argued.

"So you're going through with it tonight," he said heavily, "in your own way."

"Yes."

"Perhaps I should stop you." He crushed out his cigarette. "If the police were to hear—"

"No!" The word was thrown at him. "I know you don't mean that. But it's unworthy of you even to say it." She covered her face with nervous hands. "After all I *am* your wife."

He stood over her, his lips tight. There was something of the fragile, finely made puppet about her, he thought, as though she had been refashioned a hundred times by some artisan seeking after perfect delicacy and precision. He softened momentarily.

"Come with me then," he said.

"No."

"Why? Why?"

"Your way is *wrong*."

"We're the last two leaders of the opposition alive." His voice came swiftly and low. "The authority's beaten us. Their setup for killing, imprisonment, bribery and blackmail functions too well. Our whole organization's been scattered like matchsticks. The police are closing in on us. We're finished here on earth. We'll be lucky if we're killed quickly." He waited a moment for his words to take effect. "We go along together that far."

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She stood, clasping her hands. "Of course. Of course."

"Look. I know you've finished that damned contraption of yours that'll take you into the atoms. I know you've been working on it for years. But I've been working too. My ship's been ready to take off into super-space for two days. But I haven't gone. I've been waiting for you. To wait at a time like this is to ask for death or worse. Now I demand you give up this insane idea of going into the atoms. You've got to come with me."

"I've told you I can't escape with you out into the macrocosm. It's not my *way*!"

"The word 'escape' doesn't apply," he snapped, "to what I'm doing. *You're* escaping. You'll creep into the microcosm and sit there like a seed that won't grow. You can't fight the Authority from the microcosm. That way is utter passivity and death. *My* way is fighting back. I'm going into hyper-space. My ship and I'll become so huge and powerful I'll throw suns around like snowballs. I'll toss meteors around like grains of corn. I'll upset gravities and warp time. I'll stretch and straighten space. I'll turn dimensions inside out—"

"Yes. You'll destroy. You'll ruin everything, you'll break the innocent as well as the guilty."

"I'll have to take that chance," he said grimly. "But I'll destroy the Authority and everything that goes with it."

She pulled from his grasp. "Violence and destruction are not my way. They never have been." Slowly now she sank into the chair, looked past him as she spoke. "You've always worshipped spaces and vacuums and voids. I've always been happy working with flowers and trees, the life of the meadow and valley, the rain and the new, small buds in springtime. We have always gone in opposite directions."

She paused and smiled a bit wistfully. "It's funny. Now we find, too late to help our marriage, that there's a whole universe between us. You refuse, or perhaps you're afraid, I don't know, to go to the source of everything—this table, this chair, this gown, your own flesh. You don't want to understand life; any more than you want to understand me. You must conquer it—or destroy it. You must be a giant that can kick the earth around like a football. But I *do* want to understand, for in understanding lies the cure. My machine will take me into the atoms. I'll become part of the fabric and tapestry of the very warp and woof of our world. By becoming a *part* of it, I will *know*. I'll find the secret of life in inner space and I'll return and release our people from the Authority. And you? You'll never *really* understand anything. You'll be a wild comet, yes, but I'll be a raindrop in a deep well, learning patience. I'll be a true healer."

For a moment sadness rose and softened his face. "There's nothing more to say, is there."

"I'm afraid not."

"We'll make the goodbys quick." He came to her. "At least we're being honest with each other. No lies. No pettiness. We've developed pretty powerful ideals. And they just won't fit together. It's that simple—and that good."

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She looked up at him and smiled. "At least I haven't lost you to another woman."

He returned her smile. "We're getting sentimental. This isn't good. It's weakening." He bent and lightly kissed her hair. For an instant her breathing stopped.

"Goodby."

"Goodby," she whispered.

He strode to the door and opened it. His body snapped taut.

CONFRONTING him with a drawn blaster, stood a man in the shining red garb of the police command. He resembled Mephisto with his flowing cape and snug trousers. His face was dark, his nose thin, his eyes black and very bright.

"You seem surprised," said the man in red.

Aria had half risen from the chair. As the eyes of the policeman turned on her, she sank back.

"How opportune," the policeman continued. "The eve of your departures." The smile set on his mouth. His gun snapped up on a line with Thorus' heart. "No sudden moves, or you'll be burnt to

a cinder. But no. That's what you want—a quick death. So let me threaten you with merely burning your legs off." The blaster lowered. "It may interest you to know we have a recording of your whole conversation. But there's something else."

His eyes holding Thorus, he gave a sharp command to two burly, bullnecked policemen. They stepped from the shadows and stood behind the commander. One held a small, black box.

"I see," the commander said, "You've had experience before with the truth clamps. You're frightened."

Torus motioned the commander inside. "A little fear trickles through my hate."

The door swung shut behind the three policemen. Thorus glanced at Aria. Her fingers clutched the arms of the chair. He knew she was thinking of the blocks that had recently been installed in their minds by X-ray hypnosis. Would the blocks hold after three days? Three days, they both knew was the limit.

"It's your methods of escape we must have," said the commander. He motioned to one of the policemen.

Torus watched the man step in front of him and raise the clamps to his forehead. He saw features that were thick and heavy, as though they had been roughly moulded out of too wet clay.

"You can see," the commander went on, "the tremendous advantage to us of being able to go into the macrocosm and toss meteors around like bits of corn, as you say." He glanced at Aria, who sat huddled in the chair, like a porcelain doll. "And then into the microcosm. Unlimited power. A whole new universe to conquer and colonize."

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Aria did not move or speak.

"I see she refuses to face reality." He turned to Thorus. "But *you* will face reality—and so will she when we've finished. Had you conducted your experiments in behalf of the Authority, you would have been well rewarded. But no, you have been working against us—however, it has been *for* the Authority after all."

Torus felt the clamps tight on his temples, like two steel fingers. Sitting stiffly on a chair, he felt sweat on his back and chest, felt it seep from his forehead down into his eyes, felt the burn of salt. There was tightness all through him as he waited for the first shock. His fingernails cut his palms. His breath stopped. His shoulders and arms hardened, stretched tight his tunic.

The commander flicked his finger at the one kneeling before the little black box. This one tripped a lever. A soft hum seemed to rise from the box and fill the room.

Torus listened to the hum grow until it was a soft, high pitched scream. He closed his eyes. The next instant a shattering blow ripped through every inch of his body. Fire ran along his nerves. He felt his lips grimacing away from his teeth, felt the corners of his mouth stretching back to his ears. Oh God, oh God, he cried out in silent agony. Hold back my screams. Then he heard himself groan. He cut off the sound of it. Choked. Heard a growl deep in his chest. Lights flashed in his eyes and there was a tearing apart through his whole body. A squeezing together rushed all around him and an insane pounding and pulling as though his flesh were being beaten and clawed from his bones. Time dropped away from him until it seemed he had never been aware of anything but this agony. Then he was empty of sensation. He felt himself fall forward, felt heavy hands catch him roughly and set him upright. The soft voice of the commander flowed into his mind like a voice from outer space:

"You will tell us your method of going into the macrocosm. The equations, the type ship, its propellent, where the ship is hidden."

Torus felt enveloped in a void.

The voice of the commander droned on. "All we need is a clue. We'll work out the rest."

Life and feeling and thought were surging back into Thorus now. Strength filled his muscles again. Sight came into his eyes. Again he sat straight and stiff on the chair. The block held, he thought. It held and they cannot know now!

"Speak!" The commander's voice rose. "Damn you!" He seized Thorus by the hair. "You've blocked off the information. I'll see both of you tortured until you'll wish to kill each other. Then we'll try the clamps again." He smashed his fist into Thorus' face.

On the instant the commander pulled back his fist, Thorus reached out and jerked the blaster from his belt. His foot came up hard against the man's groin. There was a grunting cry of pain. Thorus fell backward off the stool, pressing the blaster trigger as he hit the floor. He saw blood gush from the commander's middle, saw him pitch sideways, like a broken statue, heard Aria's scream. The clamps pulled from his head. He swung the gun's muzzle to the two policemen, clawing at their holsters. The blaster struck out, a long coughing hiss, a spray of flame. There were cries and gasps and jerking and clutching and the scrambling fall of the two bodies.

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Then silence.

Torus crawled unsteadily to his feet, stood swaying. The gun hung loosely in his hand. Now he felt Aria close to him, heard her voice trembling and breathy.

"Thorus! Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"The blocks held! They held!"

Steadying himself, he saw Aria glance at the bodies on the floor.

"Destruction!" she shuddered. "Nothing but destruction. Oh God, I'm sick of it!"

Thorus let the gun drop to the floor. "There's no time to talk. Your laboratory." He grasped her by the shoulders and turned her toward a bright steel door across the room. "*You'll* save time to go into your damned microcosm. *You'll* make it. Good luck. If I have any luck at all, I'll make it too." He gave her a push. Without speaking or turning back, she moved across the room, as though sleep walking. The gleaming door slab slid back as she approached it, closed behind her.

The memory of her face stayed in his mind for a long moment after she had disappeared, and from the room's atmosphere he seemed to breathe in regret and a sense of their failure. He turned abruptly, looked down at each crumpled body. Opening the door a crack, he searched the brightly lighted street for the figure of a policeman, saw none, stepped outside and ran.

IN HER laboratory, Aria worked deftly, swiftly at the transparent body-length cylinder. She checked wire connections, dials, buttons, then opened one end of the tube, lowered herself into place, when she had closed the tube, she lay still, the forefinger of her right hand resting on a button.

During all these preparations, she was viewing, with her inner sight, Thorus' tiny ship streaking through the night toward a distant mountain peak where a small metal ball, large enough for one man, sat shrouded by a screen of invisibility. Now she saw the streak of flame die in the night and the tiny ship sitting motionless beside the metal ball; saw Thorus open a hatch in the ball's side, let himself through the opening and swing shut the circle of steel.

"Thank God," she said. "Whatever comes now, at least he's made it."

Wiping away the vision of him, she hesitated a moment, said goodbye to earth and life as she'd known it and would never know it again. A moment of yearning for a chance to live safely and well as a wife and mother swept her with sadness. The yearning held her finger from the button; a final hugging of human love and full human life, a last lonely cry for earth as she had known it in childhood with the press of wind and the touch and sight of green growing things and the depth of blue above and the ground beneath.

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Feeling then as though she were plunging into midnight ocean depths, she thrust her finger hard against the button!

Instantly light shimmered all about!

The room dissolved. A sense of dreaming too vividly, yet of being deep in a sleep that was a thousand times more acutely awake than any awakeness she had ever known filled all her being. She felt herself sinking into a great bottomless depth and yet at the same time soaring through space to the ends of the universe, until both falling and soaring flowed into each other and became suspension. And then suddenly she saw all things as one. She saw the intricate design of a snowflake that was the snows of all the earth and a drop of water that held all the oceans.

There was the rhythmic beating all around as though of a great, omnipresent heart and the surge and flow of oceans of lifeblood and the rise and fall of eternal breathing. A speck of soil was the soil of all the earth, from which grew forests and fields of green. She let herself out into the space of all this and was merely there, like time is, where there is the motion and change of birth and death and birth again and death again. She felt a gentle touch on her body that was the body of all mankind and knew it for the touch of air, a single element of all earth's winds that yet was all the clear winds of earth.

The next moment a thundrous roar crashed like a tidal wave. She felt a gigantic shaking in all the snow and water, in the oceans and mountains, in the air and wind, in the blood and life and beating heart. A faltering of the rhythm and flow went, like a cosmic shudder, through all this life and through her own being so that she was conscious of nausea and ache and a violent flinging about.

She had a sense then of pulling within herself, like a sea anemone that has been touched by an enemy.

And in her silent voice, she cried out, "Thorus!"

In the macrocosm. Thorus destroying! Destroying! The next instant her inner sight swung back to where Thorus' ship, the shining metal ball, had leapt up off the mountain of earth; leapt, in the fraction of a second, through the blue earth covering into black, outer space. Her inner sight saw the metal ball inflating, a cosmic balloon, flashing like the sun, then seeming to fill the space between all the suns!

THORUS, in his ship, was conscious of being a colossus that could step from planet to planet as though he were using them for stones to cross a pond of earth water. Step past the solar system, he thought, out into the universe. Now the sun became a tiny ball of fire, a lightning bug, the earth a grain of dust. He could blow out the light of the sun, flick Earth and the other planets into nothingness. "I've broken through," he thought. "I've done it! I've been released." And looking out and away, he saw universe upon universe extending past infinity, it seemed, an ocean without a horizon.

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Now, said his thought, I will destroy all evil and I shall begin with the evil of earth. As though he were looking through a microscope, he focused his sight on the grain of dust that was earth. His fingers made delicate adjustments on a dial, and earth, softly green and blue, swam clearly into his vision. He magnified his sight of earth until he could see all of it like a gigantic relief map. He saw the fortified places of the Authority—great, spreading, shining, metal domes; saw them dotting the earth; saw the lines of vehicles speeding back and forth between them. He saw too the hamlets of the people, in the spaces between the forts of the Authority, all places of squalor with row upon row of boxlike houses, each exactly like the other. There were not any green lawns or shade trees, only houses and streets and people moving about.

Thorus felt his anger rise. He pressed a button that flung out fields of gravity. Earth rocked and heaved, like an animal in convulsions. Volcanos exploded, shot out their flaming, poisonous refuse. Oceans were monsters writhing and rolling in their troughs, reaching onto the land, as though to pull it beneath them. And the land itself split wide and snapped shut great, yawning jaws. There was a wild rushing about among all the people, a madness, as though frantic motion would save them. They looked up off the convulsed earth with panic stricken eyes, their voices raised in agony.

Thorus' voice sounded, "The time for the death of the Authority has come. I will crush them as though I were crushing snails." He reached out from the ship with rays that seized meteors and flung them like a schoolboy flinging stones at bottles, one by one against the massive, shining domes of the Authority. The domes cracked and split and were crushed. The atomic bombs broke open with flame that leapt up yellow tongues and grew mushrooms in the sky, and a burning death spread all around.

Then Thorus was quiet, watching all that he had destroyed.

But suddenly, he became aware of Aria's thought within him, crying out. "Destroyer! Murderer! In moments you've set humanity back a hundred thousand years. You're worse than the Authority. There'll never be any peace for you or for the earth or even the universe after what you've done. Other Authorities will come and you'll have to destroy them and others and others. Destruction for you forever, on and on, until you fill the universe with it..."

In his mind, Thorus saw her among the falling snowflakes and the drops of cool water and the green, growing atoms; saw her in the transparent tube sink deeper and deeper into the microcosm, away and away like a minnow swimming down into a beautiful lake on a summer's day. Deeper, ever deeper, until there was nothing but the blue, sleepy water.

As Thorus looked upon the earth again and saw the terrible destruction he had wrought, he trembled. There was the realization in him that, beneath his consciousness, had lain the hope that, after he had wiped clean the earth, Aria's healing power would remake it. But now there would be no healing, and for thousands of years earth would lie a smoking ruins with the people crawling about its shattered surface like bugs.

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He turned from all he saw. He closed his eyes and threw his ship out into space, threw it away into the fathomless void. He must escape from the universe, must flee from the horror that filled him at the desolation he had wrought. Straight out into space, out into the forever, where earth would cease to exist, where he and his remorse would be lost.

GLEAMING suns and galaxies streaked past yet he seemed within himself to be hanging motionless in an infinite sea of blackness while he knew that the speed of him cracked through the barrier of time and space; knew that it was a speed beyond any conceived by the mind of man. On into forgetfulness, escape beyond his memory, faster and farther away than his mind, so far away that even earth would disappear in his thought.

As incredible distances stretched almost to breaking between himself and earth, he thought: So this is the end. For all I've been and wanted to be, this is it. A nothingness beyond the universe.

But as the last word went from his thought, he saw a greenish blue ball of light rush toward him. He watched it inflate in the port. It enveloped the whole ship. The suns and the galaxies had faded into nothingness. He was aware of sinking into eternal depths but at the same time he felt himself soaring until sinking and soaring flowed into each other. After a time, he saw shimmering white crystals encircling his ship. And then the encircling crystals became one snowflake reflecting light like the moon.

A great wonder filled him and he stared in overwhelming awe. He heard his own heartbeat in his body and outside the ship, holding the ship in an eternal throbbing; heard the flowing of his own blood like a turbulent river; heard his breathing become the ebb and flow of wind, like the sound

of surf. His body too became the soil of earth and its rock and water and he was deeply conscious of growth all through him. He was birth and death and he was both in one and he was the life of mankind, of animals, of plants.

As he waited in what seemed to be eternity, sunlight broke into his sight and he saw a field of grass forming around his ship. Blue sky swam into focus above him. White cloud patches formed in the blue as though they had been ordered there by the word of creation. Thorus knew then that he was on earth again, that he had come up from deep inside it.

Rising up, like one awakening uncertainly from sleep in a strange room, he opened the ship's hatch and looked out upon the land. A flash of light caught his eyes then, from above, and he looked up in wonder.

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He gasped.

ARIA, in the transparent cylinder, sinking down through the blue, like a leaf, settling gently to the earth a hundred feet away.

She crawled out and stood looking across the field of grass at him, a strange, smile on her face.

Thorus leaped from his ship and ran toward her. He ran silently. She held out her hands and he grasped them tenderly, as he would grasp the hands of a child. And all he could say was, "Aria. Aria."

"Thorus," she said, and there was courage and joy in her voice. "We've come back."

They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment and then they were close, and they held to each other and swayed.

"Do you know what's happened?" she said.

"Yes. You came back through hyper-space while *I* came back through the atoms." His voice was quiet. "Oh, Lord. Oh good and strange Lord. We forgot that one of the great men twenty thousand years ago, proved that space was curved."

"Yes." She stood away from him now, yet held to his hand. "We couldn't escape from our place in life or ourselves or the good and the evil that we have done. We came back to our earth and now we must do what we have left undone."

There was much to be done.

Thorus looked around. He saw in the distance a crushed and smoking ruins. "I've destroyed the Authority, but I've destroyed too much. Now the people are in chaos."

Aria stood silently awhile, and then moved his arm. "But now you can help me to heal them. You've seen in the microcosm, as I have in the macrocosm that all life is one. Now we can show the people that outer and inner space are not separate. We can show them how they exist together and how there can be no escape in either or from either. It will take a long time. But we will do it. And the doing will be grand." She paused. "The beginning and the end, Thorus. The greatness and the smallness. The light and the darkness. It's all here."

"And all that's in between. That too."

"Yes," she answered quietly. "That too."

They turned to the smoking ruins and arm in arm began walking toward it.

THE END

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Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CIRCLE OF FLIGHT ***

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