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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SARGASSO OF SPACE ***





She was floating along the wreck-pack's edge.

The Sargasso of Space

By Edmond Hamilton

Helpless, doomed, into the graveyard
of space floats the wrecked
freighter *Pallas*.

CAPTAIN CRAIN faced his crew calmly. "We may as well face the facts, men," he said. "The ship's fuel-tanks are empty and we are drifting through space toward the dead-area."

The twenty-odd officers and men gathered on the middle-deck of the freighter *Pallas* made no answer, and Crain continued:

"We left Jupiter with full tanks, more than enough fuel to take us to Neptune. But the leaks in the starboard tanks lost us half our supply, and we had used the other half before discovering that. Since the ship's rocket-tubes cannot operate without fuel, we are simply drifting. We would drift on to Neptune if the attraction of Uranus were not pulling us to the right. That attraction alters our course so that in three ship-days we shall drift into the dead-area."

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Rance Kent, first-officer of the *Pallas*, asked a question: "Couldn't we, raise Neptune with the radio, sir, and have them send out a fuel-ship in time to reach us?"

"It's impossible, Mr. Kent," Crain answered. "Our main radio is dead without fuel to run its dynamotors, and our auxiliary set hasn't the power to reach Neptune."

"Why not abandon ship in the space-suits," asked Liggett, the second-officer, "and trust to the chance of some ship picking us up?"

The captain shook his head. "It would be quite useless, for we'd simply drift on through space with the ship into the dead-area."

The score of members of the crew, bronzed space-sailors out of every port in the solar system, had listened mutely. Now, one of them, a tall tube-man, stepped forward a little.

"Just what is this dead-area, sir?" he asked. "I've heard of it, but as this is my first outer-planet voyage, I know nothing about it."

"I'll admit I know little more," said Liggett, "save that a good many disabled ships have drifted into it and have never come out."

"THE dead area," Crain told them, "is a region of space ninety thousand miles across within Neptune's orbit, in which the ordinary gravitational attractions of the solar system are dead. This is because in that region the pulls of the sun and the outer planets exactly balance each other. Because of that, anything in the dead-area, will stay in there until time ends, unless it has power of its own. Many wrecked space-ships have drifted into it at one time or another, none ever emerging; and it's believed that there is a great mass of wrecks somewhere in the area, drawn and held together by mutual attraction."

"And we're drifting in to join them," Kent said. "Some prospect!"

"Then there's really no chance for us?" asked Liggett keenly.

Captain Crain thought. "As I see it, very little," he admitted. "If our auxiliary radio can reach some nearby ship before the *Pallas* enters the dead-area, we'll have a chance. But it seems a remote one."

He addressed himself to the men: "I have laid the situation frankly before you because I consider you entitled to the truth. You must remember, however, that while there is life there is hope.

"There will be no change in ship routine, and the customary watches will be kept. Half-rations of food and water will be the rule from now on, though. That is all."

As the men moved silently off, the captain looked after them with something of pride.

"They're taking it like men," he told Kent and Liggett. "It's a pity there's no way out for them and us."

"If the *Pallas* does enter the dead-area and join the wreck-pack," Liggett said, "how long will we be able to live?"

"Probably for some months on our present condensed air and food supplies," Crain answered. "I would prefer, myself, a quicker end."

"So would I," said Kent. "Well, there's nothing left but to pray for some kind of ship to cross our path in the next day or two."

KENT'S prayers were not answered in the next ship-day, nor in the next. For, though one of the *Pallas'* radio-operators was constantly at the instruments under Captain Crain's orders, the weak calls of the auxiliary set raised no response.

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Had they been on the Venus or Mars run, Kent told himself, there would be some chance, but out here in the vast spaces, between the outer planets, ships were fewer and farther between. The big, cigar-shaped freighter drifted helplessly on in a broad curve toward the dreaded area, the green light-speck of Neptune swinging to their left.

On the third ship-day Kent and Captain Crain stood in the pilot-house behind Liggett, who sat at the now useless rocket-tube controls. Their eyes were on the big glass screen of the gravograph. The black dot on it that represented their ship was crawling steadily toward the bright red circle that stood for the dead-area....

They watched silently until the dot had crawled over the circle's red line, heading toward its center.

"Well, we're in at last," Kent commented. "There seems to be no change in anything, either."

Crain pointed to the instrument-panel. "Look at the gravimeters."

Kent did. "All dead! No gravitational pull from any direction—no, that one shows a slight attraction from ahead!"

"Then gravitational attraction of some sort does exist in the dead-area after all!" Liggett exclaimed.

"You don't understand," said Crain. "That attraction from ahead is the pull of the wreck-pack at the dead-area's center."

"And it's pulling the *Pallas* toward it?" Kent exclaimed.

Crain nodded. "We'll probably reach the wreck-pack in two more ship-days."

THE next two ship-days seemed to Kent drawn out endlessly. A moody silence had grown upon the officers and men of the ship. All seemed oppressed by the strange forces of fate that had seized the ship and were carrying it, smoothly and soundlessly, into this region of irrevocable doom.

The radio-operators' vain calls had ceased. The *Pallas* drifted on into the dreaded area like some dumb ship laden with damned souls. It drifted on, Kent told himself, as many a wrecked and disabled ship had done before it, with the ordinary activities and life of the solar system forever behind it, and mystery and death ahead.

It was toward the end of the second of those two ship-days that Liggett's voice came down from the pilot-house:

"Wreck-pack in sight ahead!"

"We've arrived, anyway!" Kent cried, as he and Crain hastened up into the pilot house. The crew was running to the deck-windows.

"Right ahead there, about fifteen degrees left," Liggett told Kent and Crain, pointing. "Do you see it?"

Kent stared; nodded. The wreck-pack was a distant, disk-like mass against the star-flecked heavens, a mass that glinted here and there in the feeble sunlight of space. It did not seem large, but, as they drifted steadily closer in the next hours, they saw that in reality the wreck-pack was tremendous, measuring at least fifty miles across.

Its huge mass was a heterogeneous heap, composed mostly of countless cigar-like space-ships in all stages of wreckage. Some appeared smashed almost out of all recognizable shape, while others were, to all appearances unharmed. They floated together in this dense mass in space, crowded against one another by their mutual attraction.

There seemed to be among them every type of ship known in the solar system, from small, swift mail-boats to big freighters. And, as they drifted nearer, the three in the pilot-house could see that around and between the ships of the wreck-pack floated much other matter—fragments of wreckage, meteors, small and large, and space-debris of every sort.

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The *Pallas* was drifting, not straight toward the wreck-pack, but in a course that promised to take the ship past it.

"We're not heading into the wreck-pack!" Liggett exclaimed. "Maybe we'll drift past it, and on out the dead-area's other side!"

CAPTAIN CRAIN smiled mirthlessly. "You're forgetting your space-mechanics, Liggett. We will drift along the wreck-pack's edge, and then will curve in and go round it in a closing spiral until we reach its edge."

"Lord, who'd have thought there were so many wrecks here!" Kent marvelled. "There must be thousands of them!"

"They've been collecting here ever since the first interplanetary rocket-ships went forth," Crain reminded him. "Not only meteor-wrecked ships, but ships whose mechanisms went wrong—or that ran out of fuel like ours—or that were captured and sacked, and then set adrift by space-pirates."

The *Pallas* by then was drifting along the wreck-pack's rim at a half-mile distance, and Kent's eyes were running over the mass.

"Some of those ships look entirely undamaged. Why couldn't we find one that has fuel in its tanks, transfer it to our own tanks, and get away?" he asked.

Crain's eyes lit. "Kent, that's a real chance! There must be some ships in that pack with fuel in them, and we can use the space-suits to explore for them!"

"Look, we're beginning to curve in around the pack now!" Liggett exclaimed.

The *Pallas*, as though loath to pass the wreck-pack, was curving inward to follow its rim. In the next hours it continued to sail slowly around the great pack, approaching closer and closer to its edge.

In those hours Kent and Crain and all in the ship watched with a fascinated interest that even knowledge of their own peril could not kill. They could see swift-lined passenger-ships of the Pluto and Neptune runs shouldering against small space-yachts with the insignia of Mars or Venus on their bows. Wrecked freighters from Saturn or Earth floated beside rotund grain-boats from Jupiter.

The debris among the pack's wrecks was just as varied, holding fragments of metal, dark

meteors of differing size—and many human bodies. Among these were some clad in the insulated space-suits, with their transparent glassite helmets. Kent wondered what wreck they had abandoned hastily in those suits, only to be swept with it into the dead-area, to die in their suits.

By the end of that ship-day, the *Pallas*, having floated almost completely around the wreck-pack, finally struck the wrecks at its edge with a jarring shock; then bobbed for a while and lay still. From pilot-house and deck windows the men looked eagerly forth.

THEIR ship floated at the wreck-pack's edge. Directly to its right floated a sleek, shining Uranus-Jupiter passenger-ship whose bows had been smashed in by a meteor. On their left bobbed an unmarked freighter of the old type with projecting rocket-tubes, apparently intact. Beyond them in the wreck-pack lay another Uranus craft, a freighter, and, beyond it, stretched the countless other wrecks.

Captain Crain summoned the crew together again on the middle-deck.

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"Men, we've reached the wreck-pack at the dead-area's center, and here we'll stay until the end of time unless we get out under our own power. Mr. Kent has suggested a possible way of doing so, which I consider highly feasible.

"He has suggested that in some of the ships in the wreck-pack may be found enough fuel to enable us to escape from the dead-area, once it is transferred to this ship. I am going to permit him to explore the wreck-pack with a party in space suits, and I am asking for volunteers for this service."

The entire crew stepped quickly forward. Crain smiled. "Twelve of you will be enough," he told them. "The eight tube-men and four of the cargo-men will go, therefore, with Mr. Kent and Mr. Liggett as leaders. Mr. Kent, you may address the men if you wish."

"Get down to the lower airlock and into your space-suits at once, then," Kent told them. "Mr. Liggett, will you supervise that?"

As Liggett and the men trooped down to the airlock, Kent turned back toward his superior.

"There's a very real chance of your becoming lost in this huge wreck-pack, Kent," Crain told him: "so be very careful to keep your bearings at all times. I know I can depend on you."

"I'll do my best," Kent was saying, when Liggett's excited face reappeared suddenly at the stair.

"There are men coming toward the *Pallas* along the wreck-pack's edge!" he reported—"a half-dozen men in space-suits!"

"You must be mistaken, Liggett!" exclaimed Crain. "They must be some of the bodies in space-suits we saw in the pack."

"No, they're living men!" Liggett cried. "They're coming straight toward us—come down and see!"

CRAIN and Kent followed Liggett quickly down to the airlock room, where the men who had started donning their space-suits were now peering excitedly from the windows. Crain and Kent looked where Liggett pointed, along the wreck-pack's edge to the ship's right.

Six floating shapes, men in space-suits, were approaching along the pack's border. They floated smoothly through space, reaching the wrecked passenger-ship beside the *Pallas*. They braced their feet against its side and propelled themselves on through the void like swimmers under water, toward the *Pallas*.

"They must be survivors from some wreck that drifted in here as we did!" Kent exclaimed. "Maybe they've lived here for months!"

"It's evident that they saw the *Pallas* drift into the pack, and have come to investigate," Crain estimated. "Open the airlock for them, men, for they'll want to come inside."

Two of the men spun the wheels that slid aside the airlock's outer door. In a moment the half-dozen men outside had reached the ship's side, and had pulled themselves down inside the airlock.

When all were in, the outer door was closed, and air hissed in to fill the lock. The airlock's inner door then slid open and the newcomers stepped into the ship's interior, unscrewing their transparent helmets as they did so. For a few moments the visitors silently surveyed their new surroundings.

Their leader was a swarthy individual with sardonic black eyes who, on noticing Crain's captain-insignia, came toward him with outstretched hand. His followers seemed to be cargo-men or deck-men, looking hardly intelligent enough to Kent's eyes to be tube-men.

"WELCOME to our city!" their leader exclaimed as he shook Crain's hand. "We saw your ship drift in, but hardly expected to find anyone living in it."

"I'll confess that we're surprised ourselves to find any life here," Crain told him. "You're living on one of the wrecks?"

The other nodded. "Yes, on the *Martian Queen*, a quarter-mile along the pack's edge. It was a Saturn-Neptune passenger ship, and about a month ago we were at this cursed dead-area's edge, when half our rocket-tubes exploded. Eighteen of us escaped the explosion, the ship's walls still being tight; and we drifted into the pack here, and have been living here ever since."

"My name's Krell," he added, "and I was a tube-man on the ship. I and another of the tube-men, named Jandron, were the highest in rank left, all the officers and other tube-men having been killed, so we took charge and have been keeping order."

"What about your passengers?" Liggett asked.

"All killed but one," Krell answered. "When the tubes let go they smashed up the whole lower two decks."

Crain briefly explained to him the *Pallas'* predicament. "Mr. Kent and Mr. Liggett were on the point of starting a search of the wreck-pack for fuel when you arrived," he said, "With enough fuel we can get clear of the dead-area."

Krell's eyes lit up. "That would mean a getaway for all of us! It surely ought to be possible!"

"Do you know whether there are any ships in the pack with fuel in their tanks?" Kent asked. Krell shook his head.

"We've searched through the wreck-pack a good bit, but never bothered about fuel, it being no good to us. But there ought to be some, at least: there's enough wrecks in this cursed place to make it possible to find almost anything.

"You'd better not start exploring, though," he added, "without some of us along as guides, for I'm here to tell you that you can lose yourself in this wreck-pack without knowing it. If you wait until to-morrow, I'll come over myself and go with you."

"I think that would be wise," Crain said to Kent. "There is plenty of time."

"Time is the one thing there's plenty of in this damned place," Krell agreed. "We'll be getting back to the *Martian Queen* now and give the good news to Jandron and the rest."

"Wouldn't mind if Liggett and I came along, would you?" Kent asked. "I'd like to see how your ship's fixed—that is, if it's all right with you, sir," he added to his superior.

Crain nodded. "All right if you don't stay long," he said. But, to Kent's surprise Krell seemed reluctant to endorse his proposal.

"I guess it'll be all right," he said slowly, "though there's nothing much on the *Martian Queen* to see."

KRELL and his followers replaced their helmets and returned into the airlock. Liggett followed them, and, as Kent struggled hastily into a space-suit, he found Captain Crain at his side.

"Kent, look sharp when you get over on that ship," Crain told him. "I don't like the look of this Krell, and his story about all the officers being killed in the explosion sounds fishy to me."

"To me, too," Kent agreed. "But Liggett and I will have the suit-phones in our space-suits and can call you from there in case of need."

Crain nodded, and Kent with space-suit on and transparent helmet screwed tight, stepped into the airlock with the rest. The airlock's inner door closed, the outer one opened, and as the air puffed out into space, Kent and Krell and Liggett leapt out into the void, the others following.

It was no novelty to Kent to float in a space-suit in the empty void. He and the others now floated as smoothly as though under water toward a wrecked liner at the *Pallas'* right. They reached it, pulled themselves around it, and, with feet braced against its side, propelled themselves on through space along the border of the wreck-pack.

They passed a half-dozen wrecks thus, before coming to the *Martian Queen*. It was a silvery, glistening ship whose stern and lower walls were bulging and strained, but not cracked. Kent told himself that Krell had spoken truth about the exploding rocket-tubes, at least.

They struck the *Martian Queen's* side and entered the upper-airlock open for them. Once through the airlock they found themselves on the ship's upper-deck. And when Kent and Liggett removed their helmets with the others they found a full dozen men confronting them, a brutal-faced group who exhibited some surprise at sight of them.

FOREMOST among them stood a tall, heavy individual who regarded Kent and Liggett with the cold, suspicious eyes of an animal.

"My comrade and fellow-ruler here, Wald Jandron," said Krell. To Jandron he explained rapidly. "The whole crew of the *Pallas* is alive, and they say if they can find fuel in the wreck-pack their ship can get out of here."

"Good," grunted Jandron. "The sooner they can do it, the better it will be for us."

Kent saw Liggett flush angrily, but he ignored Jandron and spoke to Krell. "You said one of your passengers had escaped the explosion?"

To Kent's amazement a girl stepped from behind the group of men, a slim girl with pale face and steady, dark eyes. "I'm the passenger," she told him. "My name's Marta Mallen."

Kent and Liggett stared, astounded. "Good Lord!" Kent exclaimed. "A girl like you on this ship!"

"Miss Mallen happened to be on the upper-deck at the time of the explosion and, so, escaped when the other passengers were killed," Krell explained smoothly. "Isn't that so, Miss Mallen?"

The girl's eyes had not left Kent's, but at Krell's words she nodded. "Yes, that is so," she said mechanically.

Kent collected his whirling thoughts. "But wouldn't you rather go back to the *Pallas* with us?" he asked. "I'm sure you'd be more comfortable there."

"She doesn't go," grunted Jandron. Kent turned in quick wrath toward him, but Krell intervened.

"Jandron only means that Miss Mallen is much more comfortable on this passenger-ship than she'd be in your freighter." He shot a glance at the girl as he spoke, and Kent saw her wince.

"I'm afraid that's so," she said; "but I thank you for the offer, Mr. Kent."

Kent could have sworn that there was an appeal in her eyes, and he stood for a moment, indecisive, Jandron's stare upon him. After a moment's thought he turned to Krell.

"You were going to show me the damage the exploding tubes did," he said, and Krell nodded quickly.

"Of course; you can see from the head of the stair back in the after-deck."

He led the way along a corridor, Jandron and the girl and two of the men coming with them. Kent's thoughts were still chaotic as he walked between Krell and Liggett. What was this girl doing amid the men of the *Martian Queen*? What had her eyes tried to tell him?

Liggett nudged his side in the dim corridor, and Kent, looking down, saw dark splotches on its metal floor. Blood-stains! His suspicions strengthened. They might be from the bleeding of those wounded in the tube-explosions. But were they?

THEY reached the after-deck whose stair's head gave a view of the wrecked tube-rooms beneath. The lower decks had been smashed by terrific forces. Kent's practiced eyes ran rapidly over the shattered rocket-tubes.

"They've back-blasted from being fired too fast," he said. "Who was controlling the ship when this happened?"

"Galling, our second-officer," answered Krell. "He had found us routed too close to the dead-area's edge and was trying to get away from it in a hurry, when he used the tubes too fast, and half of them back-blasted."

"If Galling was at the controls in the pilot-house, how did the explosion kill him?" asked Liggett skeptically. Krell turned quickly.

"The shock threw him against the pilot-house wall and fractured his skull—he died in an hour,"

he said. Liggett was silent.

"Well, this ship will never move again," Kent said. "It's too bad that the explosion blew out your tanks, but we ought to find fuel somewhere in the wreck-pack for the *Pallas*. And now we'd best get back."

As they returned up the dim corridor Kent managed to walk beside Marta Mallen, and, without being seen, he contrived to detach his suit-phone—the compact little radiophone case inside his space-suit's neck—and slip it into the girl's grasp. He dared utter no word of explanation, but apparently she understood, for she had concealed the suit-phone by the time they reached the upper-deck.

Kent and Liggett prepared to don their space-helmets, and before entering the airlock, Kent turned to Krell.

"We'll expect you at the *Pallas* first hour to-morrow, and we'll start searching the wreck-pack with a dozen of our men," he said.

He then extended his hand to the girl. "Good-by, Miss Mallen. I hope we can have a talk soon."

He had said the words with double meaning, and saw understanding in her eyes. "I hope we can, too," she said.

Kent's nod to Jandron went unanswered, and he and Liggett adjusted their helmets and entered the airlock.

Once out of it, they kicked rapidly away from the *Martian Queen*, floating along with the wreck-pack's huge mass to their right, and only the star-flecked emptiness of infinity to their left. In a few minutes they reached the airlock of the *Pallas*.

THEY found Captain Crain awaiting them anxiously. Briefly Kent reported everything.

"I'm certain there has been foul play aboard the *Martian Queen*," he said. "Krell you saw for yourself, Jandron is pure brute, and their men seem capable of anything."

"I gave the suit-phone to the girl, however, and if she can call us with it, we can get the truth from her. She dared not tell me anything there in the presence of Krell and Jandron."

Crain nodded, his face grave. "We'll see whether or not she calls," he said.

Kent took a suit-phone from one of their space-suits and rapidly, tuned it to match the one he had left with Marta Mallen. Almost at once they heard her voice from it, and Kent answered rapidly.

"I'm so glad I got you!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Kent, I dared not tell you the truth about this ship when you were here, or Krell and the rest would have killed you at once."

"I thought that was it, and that's why I left the suit-phone for you," Kent said. "Just what is the truth?"

"Krell and Jandron and these men of theirs are the ones who killed the officers and passengers of the *Martian Queen*! What they told you about the explosion was true enough, for the explosion did happen that way, and because of it, the ship drifted into the dead-area. But the only ones killed by it were some of the tube-men and three passengers."

"Then, while the ship was drifting into the dead-area, Krell told the men that the fewer aboard, the longer they could live on the ship's food and air. Krell and Jandron led the men in a surprise attack and killed all the officers and passengers, and threw their bodies out into space. I was the only passenger they spared, because both Krell and Jandron—want me!"

THERE was a silence, and Kent felt a red anger rising in him. "Have they dared harm you?" he asked after a moment.

"No, for Krell and Jandron are too jealous of each other to permit the other to touch me. But it's been terrible living with them in this awful place."

"Ask her if she knows what their plans are in regard to us," Crain told Kent.

Marta had apparently overheard the question. "I don't know that, for they shut me in my cabin as soon as you left," she said. "I've heard them talking and arguing excitedly, though. I know that if you do find fuel, they'll try to kill you all and escape from here in your ship."

"Pleasant prospect," Kent commented. "Do you think they plan an attack on us now?"

"No; I think that they'll wait until you've refueled your ship, if you are able to do that, and then

try treachery."

"Well, they'll find us ready. Miss Mallen, you have the suit-phone: keep it hidden in your cabin and I'll call you first thing to-morrow. We're going to get you out of there, but we don't want to break with Krell until we're ready. Will you be all right until then?"

"Of course I will," she answered. "There's another thing, though. My name isn't Miss Mallen—it's Marta."

"Mine's Rance," said Kent, smiling. "Good-by until to-morrow, then, Marta."

"Good-by, Rance."

Kent rose from the instrument with the smile still in his eyes, but with his lips compressed. "Damn it, there's the bravest and finest girl in the solar system!" he exclaimed. "Over there with those brutes!"

"We'll have her out, never fear," Crain reassured him. "The main thing is to determine our course toward Krell and Jandron."

Kent thought. "As I see it, Krell can help us immeasurably in our search through the wreck-pack for fuel," he said. "I think it would be best to keep on good terms with him until we've found fuel and have it in our tanks. Then we can turn the tables on them before they can do anything."

Crain nodded thoughtfully. "I think you're right. Then you and Liggett and Krell can head our search-party to-morrow."

Crain established watches on a new schedule, and Kent and Liggett and the dozen men chosen for the exploring party of the next day ate a scanty meal and turned in for some sleep.

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WHEN Kent woke and glimpsed the massed wrecks through the window he was for the moment amazed, but rapidly remembered. He and Liggett were finishing their morning ration when Crain pointed to a window.

"There comes Krell now," he said, indicating the single space-suited figure approaching along the wreck-pack's edge.

"I'll call Marta before he gets here," said Kent hastily.

The girl answered on the suit-phone immediately, and it occurred to Kent that she must have spent the night without sleeping. "Krell left a few minutes ago," she said.

"Yes, he's coming now. You heard nothing of their plans?"

"No; they've kept me shut in my cabin. However, I did hear Krell giving Jandron and the rest directions. I'm sure they're plotting something."

"We're prepared for them," Kent assured her. "If all goes well, before you realize it, you'll be sailing out of here with us in the *Pallas*."

"I hope so," she said. "Rance, be careful with Krell in the wreck-pack. He's dangerous."

"I'll be watching him," he promised. "Good-by, Marta."

Kent reached the lower-deck just as Krell entered from the airlock, his swarthy face smiling as he removed his helmet. He carried a pointed steel bar. Liggett and the others were donning their suits.

"All ready to go, Kent?" Krell asked.

Kent nodded. "All ready," he said shortly. Since hearing Marta's story he found it hard to dissimulate with Krell.

"You'll want bars like mine," Krell continued, "for they're damned handy when you get jammed between wreckage masses. Exploring this wreck-pack is no soft job: I can tell you from experience."

Liggett and the rest had their suits adjusted, and with bars in their grasp, followed Krell into the airlock. Kent hung back for a last word with Crain, who, with his half-dozen remaining men, was watching.

"Marta just told me that Krell and Jandron have been plotting something," he told the captain; "so I'd keep a close watch outside."

"Don't worry, Kent. We'll let no one inside the *Pallas* until you and Liggett and the men get back."

IN a few minutes they were out of the ship, with Krell and Kent and Liggett leading, and the twelve members of the *Pallas*' crew following closely.

The three leaders climbed up on the Uranus-Jupiter passenger-ship that lay beside the *Pallas*, the others moving on and exploring the neighboring wrecks in parties of two and three. From the top of the passenger-ship, when they gained it, Kent and his two companions could look far out over the wreck-pack. It was an extraordinary spectacle, this stupendous mass of dead ships floating motionless in the depths of space, with the burning stars above and below them.

His companions and the other men clambering over the neighboring wrecks seemed weird figures in their bulky suits and transparent helmets. Kent looked back at the *Pallas*, and then along the wreck-pack's edge to where he could glimpse the silvery side of the *Martian Queen*. But now Krell and Liggett were descending into the ship's interior through the great opening smashed in its bows, and Kent followed.

They found themselves in the liner's upper navigation-rooms. Officers and men lay about, frozen to death at the instant the meteor-struck vessel's air had rushed out, and the cold of space had entered. Krell led the way on, down into the ship's lower decks, where they found the bodies of the crew and passengers lying in the same silent death.

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The salons held beautifully-dressed women, distinguished-looking men, lying about as the meteor's shock had hurled them. One group lay around a card-table, their game interrupted. A woman still held a small child, both seemingly asleep. Kent tried to shake off the oppression he felt as he and Krell and Liggett continued down to the tank-rooms.

They found their quest there useless, for the tanks had been strained by the meteor's shock, and were empty. Kent felt Liggett grasp his hand and heard him speak, the sound-vibrations coming through their contacting suits.

"Nothing here; and we'll find it much the same through all these wrecks, if I'm not wrong. Tanks always give at a shock."

"There must be some ships with fuel still in them among all these," Kent answered.

THEY climbed back, up to the ship's top, and leapt off it toward a Jupiter freighter lying a little farther inside the pack. As they floated toward it, Kent saw their men moving on with them from ship to ship, progressing inward into the pack. Both Kent and Liggett kept Krell always ahead of them, knowing that a blow from his bar, shattering their glassite helmets, meant instant death. But Krell seemed quite intent on the search for fuel.

The big Jupiter freighter seemed intact from above, but, when they penetrated into it, they found its whole under-side blown away, apparently by an explosion of its tanks. They moved on to the next ship, a private space-yacht, small in size, but luxurious in fittings. It had been abandoned in space, its rocket-tubes burst and tanks strained.

They went on, working deeper into the wreck-pack. Kent almost forgot the paramount importance of their search in the fascination of it. They explored almost every known type of ship—freighters, liners, cold-storage boats, and grain-boats. Once Kent's hopes ran high at sight of a fuel-ship, but it proved to be in ballast, its cargo-tanks empty and its own tanks and tubes apparently blown simultaneously.

Kent's muscles ached from the arduous work of climbing over and exploring the wrecks. He and Liggett had become accustomed to the sight of frozen, motionless bodies.

As they worked deeper into the pack, they noticed that the ships were of increasingly older types, and at last Krell signalled a halt. "We're almost a mile in," he told them, gripping their hands. "We'd better work back out, taking a different section of the pack as we do."

Kent nodded. "It may change our luck," he said.

It did; for when they had gone not more than a half-mile back, they glimpsed one of their men waving excitedly from the top of a Pluto liner.

They hastened at once toward him, the other men gathering also; and when Kent grasped the man's hand he heard his excited voice.

"Fuel-tanks here are more than half-full, sir!"

THEY descended quickly into the liner, finding that though its whole stern had been sheared away by a meteor, its tanks had remained miraculously unstrained.

"Enough fuel here to take the *Pallas* to Neptune!" Kent exclaimed.

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"How will you get it over to your ship?" Krell asked. Kent pointed to great reels of flexible metal tubing hanging near the tanks.

"We'll pump it over. The *Pallas* has tubing like this ship's, for taking on fuel in space, and, by joining its tubing to this, we'll have a tube-line between the two ships. It's hardly more than a quarter-mile."

"Let's get back and let them know about it," Liggett urged, and they climbed back out of the liner.

They worked their way out of the wreck-pack with much greater speed than that with which they had entered, needing only an occasional brace against a ship's side to send them floating over the wrecks. They came to the wreck-pack's edge at a little distance from the *Pallas*, and hastened toward it.

They found the outer door of the *Pallas*' airlock open, and entered, Krell remaining with them. As the outer door closed and air hissed into the lock, Kent and the rest removed their helmets. The inner door slid open as they were doing this, and from inside almost a score of men leapt upon them!

Kent, stunned for a moment, saw Jandron among their attackers, bellowing orders to them, and even as he struck out furiously he comprehended. Jandron and the men of the *Martian Queen* had somehow captured the *Pallas* from Crain and had been awaiting their return!

THE struggle was almost instantly over, for, outnumbered and hampered as they were by their heavy space-suits, Kent and Liggett and their followers had no chance. Their hands, still in the suits, were bound quickly behind them at Jandron's orders.

Kent heard an exclamation, and saw Marta starting toward him from behind Jandron's men. But a sweep of Jandron's arm brushed her rudely back. Kent strained madly at his bonds. Krell's face had a triumphant look.

"Did it all work as I told you it would, Jandron?" he asked.

"It worked," Jandron answered impassively. "When they saw fifteen of us coming from the wreck-pack in space-suits, they opened right up to us."

Kent understood, and cursed Krell's cunning. Crain, seeing the fifteen figures approaching from the wreck-pack, had naturally thought they were Kent's party, and had let them enter to overwhelm his half-dozen men.

"We put Crain and his men over in the *Martian Queen*," Jandron continued, "and took all their helmets so they can't escape. The girl we brought over here. Did you find a wreck with fuel?"

Krell nodded. "A Pluto liner a quarter-mile back, and we can pump the fuel over here by connecting tube-lines. What the devil—"

Jandron had made a signal at which three of his men had leapt forward on Krell, securing his hands like those of the others.

"Have you gone crazy, Jandron?" cried Krell, his face red with anger and surprise.

"No," Jandron replied impassively; "but the men are as tired as I am of your bossing ways, and have chosen me as their sole leader."

"You dirty double-crosser!" Krell raged. "Are you men going to let him get away with this?"

The men paid no attention, and Jandron motioned to the airlock. "Take them over to the *Martian Queen* too," he ordered, "and make sure there's no space-helmet left there. Then get back at once, for we've got to get the fuel into this ship and make a getaway."

THE helmets of Kent and Krell and the other helpless prisoners were put upon them, and, with hands still bound, they were herded into the airlock by eight of Jandron's men attired in space-suits also. The prisoners were then joined one to another by a strand of metal cable.

Kent, glancing back into the ship as the airlock's inner door closed, saw Jandron giving rapid orders to his followers, and noticed Marta held back from the airlock by one of them. Krell's eyes glittered venomously through his helmet. The outer door opened, and their guards jerked them forth into space by the connecting cable.

They were towed helplessly along the wreck-pack's rim toward the *Martian Queen*. Once inside its airlock, Jandron's men removed the prisoners' space-helmets and then used the duplicate-control inside the airlock itself to open the inner door. Through this opening they thrust the

captives, those inside the ship not daring to enter the airlock. Jandron's men then closed the inner door, re-opened the outer one, and started back toward the *Pallas* with the helmets of Kent and his companions.

Kent and the others soon found Crain and his half-dozen men who rapidly undid their bonds. Crain's men still wore their space-suits, but, like Kent's companions, were without space-helmets.

"Kent, I was afraid they'd get you and your men too!" Crain exclaimed. "It's all my fault, for when I saw Jandron and his men coming from the wreck-pack I never doubted but that it was you."

"It's no one's fault," Kent told him. "It's just something that we couldn't foresee."

CRAIN'S eyes fell on Krell. "But what's he doing here?" he exclaimed. Kent briefly explained Jandron's treachery toward Krell, and Crain's brows drew ominously together.

"So Jandron put you here with us! Krell, I am a commissioned captain of a space-ship, and as such can legally try you and sentence you to death here without further formalities."

Krell did not answer, but Kent intervened. "There's hardly time for that now, sir," he said. "I'm as anxious to settle with Krell as anyone, but right now our main enemy is Jandron, and Krell hates Jandron worse than we do, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're not," said Krell grimly. "All I want right now is to get within reach of Jandron."

"There's small chance of any of us doing that," Crain told them. "There's not a single space-helmet on the *Martian Queen*."

"You've searched?" Liggett asked.

"Every cubic inch of the ship," Crain told him. "No, Jandron's men made sure there were no helmets left here, and without helmets this ship is an inescapable prison."

"Damn it, there must be some way out!" Kent exclaimed. "Why, Jandron and his men must be starting to pump that fuel into the *Pallas* by now! They'll be sailing off as soon as they do it!"

Crain's face was sad. "I'm afraid this is the end, Kent. Without helmets, the space between the *Martian Queen* and the *Pallas* is a greater barrier to us than a mile-thick wall of steel. In this ship we'll stay, until the air and food give out, and death releases us."

"Damn it, I'm not thinking of myself!" Kent cried. "I'm thinking of Marta! The *Pallas* will sail out of here with her in Jandron's power!"

"The girl!" Liggett exclaimed. "If she could bring us over space-helmets from the *Pallas* we could get out of here!"

Kent was thoughtful. "If we could talk to her—she must still have that suit-phone I gave her. Where's another?"

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CRAIN quickly detached the compact suit-phone from inside the neck of his own space-suit, and Kent rapidly tuned it to the one he had given Marta Mallen. His heart leapt as her voice came instantly from it:

"Rance! Rance Kent—"

"Marta—this is Rance!" he cried.

He heard a sob of relief. "I've been calling you for minutes! I was hoping that you'd remember to listen!"

"Jandron and ten of the others have gone to that wreck in which you found the fuel," she added swiftly. "They unreeled a tube-line behind them as they went, and I can hear them pumping in the fuel now."

"Are the others guarding you?" Kent asked quickly.

"They're down in the lower deck at the tanks and airlocks. They won't allow me down on that deck. I'm up here in the middle-deck, absolutely alone."

"Jandron told me that we'd start out of here as soon as the fuel was in," she added, "and he and the men were laughing about Krell."

"Marta, could you in any way get space-helmets and get out to bring them over here to us?" Kent asked eagerly.

"There's a lot of space-suits and helmets here," she answered, "but I couldn't get out with them, Rance! I couldn't get to the airlocks with Jandron's seven or eight men down there guarding them!"

Kent felt despair; then as an idea suddenly flamed in him, he almost shouted into the instrument:

"Marta, unless you can get over here with helmets for us, we're all lost. I want you to put on a space-suit and helmet at once!"

THERE was a short silence, and then her voice came, a little muffled. "I've got the suit and helmet on, Rance. I'm wearing the suit-phone inside it."

"Good! Now, can you get up to the pilot-house? There's no one guarding it or the upper-deck? Hurry up there, then, at once."

Crain and the rest were staring at Kent. "Kent, what are you going to have her do?" Crain exclaimed. "It'll do no good for her to start the *Pallas*: those guards will be up there in a minute!"

"I'm not going to have her start the *Pallas*," said Kent grimly. "Marta, you're in the pilot-house? Do you see the heavy little steel door in the wall beside the instrument-panel?"

"I'm at it, but it's locked with a combination-lock," she said.

"The combination is 6-34-77-81," Kent told her swiftly. "Open it as quickly as you can."

"Good God, Kent!" cried Crain. "You're going to have her—?"

"Get out of there the only way she can!" Kent finished fiercely. "You have the door open, Marta?"

"Yes; there are six or seven control-wheels inside."

"Those wheels control the *Pallas*' exhaust-valves," Kent told her. "Each wheel opens the valves of one of the ship's decks or compartments and allows its air to escape into space. They're used for testing leaks in the different deck and compartment divisions. Marta, you must turn all those wheels as far as you can to the right."

"But all the ship's air will rush out; the guards below have no suits on, and they'll be—" she was exclaiming. Kent interrupted.

"It's the only chance for you, for all of us. Turn them!"

There was a moment of silence, and Kent was going to repeat the order when her voice came, lower in tone, a little strange:

"I understand, Rance. I'm going to turn them."

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THERE was silence again, and Kent and the men grouped round him were tense. All were envisioning the same thing—the air rushing out of the *Pallas*' valves, and the unsuspecting guards in its lower deck smitten suddenly by an instantaneous death.

Then Marta's voice, almost a sob: "I turned them, Rance. The air puffed out all around me."

"Your space-suit is working all right?"

"Perfectly," she said.

"Then go down and tie together as many space-helmets as you can manage, get out of the airlock, and try to get over here to the *Martian Queen* with them. Do you think you can do that, Marta?"

"I'm going to try," she said steadily. "But I'll have to pass those men in the lower-deck I just—killed. Don't be anxious if I don't talk for a little."

Yet her voice came again almost immediately. "Rance, the pumping has stopped! They must have pumped all the fuel into the *Pallas*!"

"Then Jandron and the rest will be coming back to the *Pallas* at once!" Kent cried. "Hurry, Marta!"

The suit-phone was silent; and Kent and the rest, their faces closely pressed against the deck-windows, peered intently along the wreck-pack's edge. The *Pallas* was hidden from their view by the wrecks between, and there was no sign as yet of the girl.

Kent felt his heart beating rapidly. Crain and Liggett pressed beside him, the men around

them; Krell's face was a mask as he too gazed. Kent was rapidly becoming convinced that some mischance had overtaken the girl when an exclamation came from Liggett. He pointed excitedly.

SHE was in sight, unrecognizable in space-suit and helmet, floating along the wreck-pack's edge toward them. A mass of the glassite space-helmets tied together was in her grasp. She climbed bravely over the stern of a projecting wreck and shot on toward the *Martian Queen*.

The airlock's door was open for her, and, when she was inside it, the outer door closed and air hissed into the lock. In a moment she was in among them, still clinging to the helmets. Kent grasped her swaying figure and removed her helmet.

"Marta, you're all right?" he cried. She nodded a little weakly.

"I'm all right. It was just that I had to go over those guards that were all frozen.... Terrible!"

"Get these helmets on!" Crain was crying. "There's a dozen of them, and twelve of us can stop Jandron's men if we get back in time!"

Kent and Liggett and the nearer of their men were swiftly donning the helmets. Krell grasped one and Crain sought to snatch it.

"Let that go! We'll not have you with us when we haven't enough helmets for our own men!"

"You'll have me or kill me here!" Krell cried, his eyes hate-mad. "I've got my own account to settle with Jandron!"

"Let him have it!" Liggett cried. "We've no time now to argue!"

Kent reached toward the girl. "Marta, give one of the men your helmet," he ordered; but she shook her head.

"I'm going with you!" Before Kent could dispute she had the helmet on again, and Crain was pushing them into the airlock. The nine or ten left inside without helmets hastily thrust steel bars into the men's hands before the inner door closed. The outer one opened and they leapt forth into space, floating smoothly along the wreck-pack's border with bars in their grasp, thirteen strong.

Kent found the slowness with which they floated forward torturing. He glimpsed Crain and Liggett ahead, Marta beside him, Krell floating behind him to the left. They reached the projecting freighters, climbed over and around them, braced against them and shot on. They sighted the *Pallas* ahead now. Suddenly they discerned another group of eleven figures in space-suits approaching it from the wreck-pack's interior, rolling up the tube-line that led from the *Pallas* as they did so. Jandron's party!

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JANDRON and his men had seen them and were suddenly making greater efforts to reach the *Pallas*. Kent and his companions, propelling themselves frenziedly on from another wreck, reached the ship's side at the same time as Jandron's men. The two groups mixed and mingled, twisted and turned in a mad space-combat.

Kent had been grasped by one of Jandron's men and raised his bar to crack the other's glassite helmet. His opponent caught the bar, and they struggled, twisting and turning over and over far up in space amid a half-score similar struggles. Kent wrenched his bar free at last from the other's grasp and brought it down on his helmet. The glassite cracked, and he caught a glimpse of the man's hate-distorted face frozen instantly in death.

Kent released him and propelled himself toward a struggling trio nearby. As he floated toward them, he saw Jandron beyond them making wild gestures of command and saw Krell approaching Jandron with upraised bar. Kent, on reaching the three combatants, found them to be two of Jandron's men overcoming Crain. He shattered one's helmet as he reached them, but saw the other's bar go up for a blow.

Kent twisted frantically, uselessly, to escape it, but before the blow could descend a bar shattered his opponent's helmet from behind. As the man froze in instant death Kent saw that it was Marta who had struck him from behind. He jerked her to his side. The struggles in space around them seemed to be ending.

Six of Jandron's party had been slain, and three of Kent's companions. Jandron's four other followers were giving up the combat, floating off into the wreck-pack in clumsy, hasty flight. Someone grasped Kent's arm, and he turned to find it was Liggett.

"They're beaten!" Liggett's voice came to him! "They're all killed but those four!"

"What about Jandron himself?" Kent cried. Liggett pointed to two space-suited bodies twisting together in space, with bars still in their lifeless grasp.

Kent saw through their shattered helmets the stiffened faces of Jandron and Krell, their helmets having apparently been broken by each other's simultaneous blows.

Crain had gripped Kent's arm also. "Kent, it's over!" he was exclaiming. "Liggett and I will close the *Pallas*' exhaust-valves and release new air in it. You take over helmets for the rest of our men in the *Martian Queen*."

IN several minutes Kent was back with the men from the *Martian Queen*. The *Pallas* was ready, with Liggett in its pilot-house, the men taking their stations, and Crain and Marta awaiting Kent.

"We've enough fuel to take us out of the dead-area and to Neptune without trouble!" Crain declared. "But what about those four of Jandron's men that got away?"

"The best we can do is leave them here," Kent told him. "Best for them, too, for at Neptune they'd be executed, while they can live indefinitely in the wreck-pack."

"I've seen so many men killed on the *Martian Queen* and here," pleaded Marta. "Please don't take them to Neptune." [Pg 406]

"All right, we'll leave them," Crain agreed, "though the scoundrels ought to meet justice." He hastened up to the pilot-house after Liggett.

In a moment came the familiar blast of the rocket-tubes, and the *Pallas* shot out cleanly from the wreck-pack's edge. A scattered cheer came from the crew. With gathering speed the ship arrowed out, its rocket-tubes blasting now in steady succession.

Kent, with his arm across Marta's shoulders, watched the wreck-pack grow smaller behind. It lay as when he first had seen it, a strange great mass, floating forever motionless among the brilliant stars. He felt the girl beside him shiver, and swung her quickly around.

"Let's not look back or remember now, Marta!" he said. "Let's look ahead."

She nestled closer inside his arm. "Yes, Rance. Let's look ahead."

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