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**Title:** In the Orbit of Saturn

**Author:** Roman Frederick Starzl

**Release Date:** June 4, 2009 [EBook #29038]

**Language:** English

**Credits:** Produced by Sankar Viswanathan, Greg Weeks, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

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This etext was produced from Astounding Stories October 1931.  
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The two fighting men circled warily.

## In the Orbit of Saturn

By R. F. Starzl

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The *Celestia*, gliding through space toward Titan, major satellite of Saturn, faltered in her course. Her passengers, mostly mining engineers and their wives, stockholders, and a sprinkling of visitors, were aware of a cessation of the heavens' apparent gyrations, due to the halting of the ship's rotation on its axis. At the same time the ship's fictitious gravity, engendered by the centrifugal force of its rotation, ceased, so that passengers, most of whom were assembled in the main salon, which occupied the entire midship section, drifted away from the curved floor, whose contour followed that of the outer skin, to flounder in helpless confusion.

*Disguised as a voluntary prisoner on a pirate space ship, an I. F. P. man penetrates the mystery of the dreaded "Solar Scourge."*

A woman screamed. A rasping sound, as of metal scraping against the hull, came from one point in the circumference, and here the portholes were obscured by a dark mass that blotted out the stars.

An old man, clinging to a luxuriously upholstered chair, and pale with fright, cried:

"It's those damned pirates. If they find out who I am it'll break the company to ransom me."

"If the company thinks it worth while to ransom you," retorted his youngish, saturnine companion, who seemed less scared than annoyed.

Questions darted back and forth. No word came from the control room forward, and little of what transpired outside could be seen through the thick glass ports. The pirate ship loomed over them like a monstrous leech, its bolts sharply etched in black and white by the sunlight from their stern. Beyond that was only the velvety darkness—the absolute vacuity of space that carries no sound, refracts no light. A battle was raging out there, but of that nothing could be seen or heard in the salon. Only a dull, booming vibration through the flyer's hull, made by the rockets in a useless effort to shake off their captor.

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Of all the passengers, none understood the situation as well as Quirl Finner. In imagination he followed the desperate struggle that was going on out there, for the men who were selling their lives were his companions in arms, the ship's guard of the redoubtable I.F.P., the Interplanetary Flying Police who carried the law of white men to the outermost orbit of the solar system.

Quirl bristled, but he maintained his pose of indifference—of the sightseeing passenger who depended blindly on the ship's crew for his own safety. In appearance he might easily have been the pampered son of some millionaire that he impersonated. His close-fitting silken tunic of blue, with its bright yellow roll-collar, the turban of fine yellow lace, the close-fitting trousers that showed his lithe yet powerfully molded legs, the thin-soled low boots—all proclaimed him the typical time-killing dandy of the times. His superb proportions made him look smaller, lighter than he really was, and his lean features, which under the I.F.P. skullcap would have looked hawk-like, were sufficiently like the patrician fineness of the character part he was playing. Young men of means in the year 2159 were by no means without their good points. They indulged in athletic sports to counteract the softening influence of idleness, and so Quirl Finner had no misgivings about the success of his disguise.

Yet he could not refrain from listening intently for every sound that penetrated the hull. His part was to be captured by the pirate, who had been named "The Solar Scourge" by sensational newscasters, and to learn all he could, and eventually to be ransomed by a "wealthy father" with his priceless information. So he waited, chafing, while men he knew, men who had faced the perils of space with him, met their death.

After a time there came the sudden crackling of the air-tight bulkhead which separated the salon from the forward sections. Quirl knew what this meant. The pirates had succeeded in breaching a hole through the ship's skin, and the air of the forward section had rushed into space. It was sickening to think of those brave men up there caught in the suddenly formed vacuum. Long before the bulkhead had ceased crackling he knew they were dead, and that the pirate crew had entered, wearing vacuum suits, and was even then replenishing the air so the passengers could be taken alive.

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They had been in the prison hold of the pirate ship for five days, terrestrial time. This was nothing like the spacious quarters they had occupied before. A cross-section of their prison would have looked like a wedge with a quarter circle for its blunt end. The curved wall of the great cylindrical projectile, nearly a hundred feet in diameter, was their floor, on which they could walk like flies on the inside of a wheel rim. The walls of the room, on two sides, converged toward the top, until they joined the sides of a well-like tunnel that ran from the nose of the ship to its tail, where the rocket nozzles were. A door pierced the tunnel side, and under this door was a metal platform, from which one could either climb into the passage or down a ladder into the hold. A pirate guard held this platform, from where he could peer over the top of a curtain which gave scant privacy to the men and women prisoners on either side of it.

On the floor-plates, without even the meager comfort of the dried Martian weeds that had been given to the women, sat or lay the men. They showed their dejection, their faces covered with new growths of beard, their clothes crumpled and torn. The only furniture consisted of a long, light metal table on the women's side, securely bolted to the floor. The prisoners were obliged to stand at this when eating their meals. The whole cheerless scene was coldly illuminated by a single light-emanating disk just under the guard's platform.

Steps echoed hollowly metallic from above. Quirl wondered if it was already time for the galley boy to bring the immense bowl of hot stew for the noon meal.

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**I**t was not. It was Moby Gore, the huge and overbearing first mate of the pirates on his daily mission of inspection and prisoner baiting. Quirl crept further into his corner. It would be fatal to his plan for him to attract the attention of this petty tyrant. It was hard enough to keep away from him—to crush back the almost overwhelming desire to fly at him, fists hammering.

Gore came down the ladder deliberately, pausing on the lower steps to look around with his little, pig's eyes. His head was set well forward on his thick, muscular neck, so that he had to look out from under his beetling brows in a manner peculiarly ape-like. His heavy face was smooth-shaven, and his blue-black jowls and chin looked painfully smooth. His coarse, black hair was brushed back and plastered firmly to his bullet head.

His body was heavy, but moved with deadly smoothness and precision. The customary harness which passed around his naked torso supported a double-barreled ironizing electrocution pistol, and also a short, savagely knobbed riot club. Depending from the belt at his waist were short pants, which displayed the thick, hairy legs with their cable-like muscles. On his feet were thick socks, so that his toes were able to curl around the rungs of the ladder.

Satisfied with his quick, darting inspection, Gore now came all the way down. At the foot of the ladder lay an elderly man in the oblivion of sleep. Gore's foot came down on the thin chest. With savage pleasure he bore down, so that the old man's startled squawk ended in a fit of coughing. Gore cuffed him aside roughly, growling:

"Old squiffer! Let that learn you to sleep out of the way!" He laughed coarsely when one of the prisoners, with the temerity of anonymity, started to boo, but received no support.

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**C**arelessly Gore passed among the prisoners. Here and there he halted, snatching some article of finery or inconspicuous bit of jewelry that he had overlooked before. They shrank from him, only too glad to see him pass on to the next unfortunate.

"You, there!" Gore rasped, indicating Quirl with his stubby forefinger. "Come on out o' there, you!"

Quirl hoped that the brutal mate would not hear the thudding of his beating heart, or that if he did, he would take it for fear. He came slowly toward Gore, who was greedily eyeing the young man's brightly colored and valuable tunic. Quirl came too slowly.

"What do you take me for?" Gore bellowed in unreasonable anger. He strode forward, the prisoners scattering before him. His large, knotty hand closed on Quirl's arm, and jerked, with the intention of whirling this reluctant prisoner across the room. But Quirl was heavier, and his arm harder, than Gore had supposed. The hand came away, and with a tearing scream, the beautiful silk garment ripped off, ruined, disclosing Quirl's white and well-knit body.

"You done that a-purpose!" Gore roared, and then his great ape's arms were around Quirl, trying to break his back.

But that seemingly slight body would not bend, and, as much as Gore might tug and heave, he could not force Quirl back. The little pig-eyes glared, and there was death in them. Suddenly Gore let go. His hand leaped to the short club at his side, and he swung the weapon in a vicious arc. Quirl's relaxed forearm met it, sapping most of its force. Yet when it struck his head it seemed to burst like a ball of fire. He crashed against the wall and sank to the floor only half conscious.

"Gore! Gore!" yelled the guard from the platform, "'member how sore the Old Man was about the last terrie you killed? Better lay off."

"Shut yo'r damned mug!" Gore yelled back. But he gave up his idea of kicking the prisoner, and with a menacing glare for the guard, passed on.

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**A**s Quirl's mind slowly cleared he congratulated himself for his repression. During his struggle with Gore his hand had come in contact with the butt of the mate's electrogun. He could easily

have pulled it out of its holster and turned it against its owner. But this hasty action would not only have assured his own death, but would have destroyed the only chance the I.F.P. had of learning "The Scourge's" secrets.

Gore slowly worked his way to the women's side of the hold. Here, much to the amusement of the guard and himself, he began stripping off their long, flowing robes, disclosing their nude bodies. He seemed to see particular humor to heaping indignity on the older women, commenting coarsely on their shortcomings. The men viewed this with set, pale faces. But none dared to interfere. In their midst was an object lesson, his head swathed in bandages. He had been the first to resent this exhibition, an almost daily event, when the mate's roving eye had happened to alight upon his wife.

All at once Gore's careless and derogatory progress was halted, and he stared with terrifying intentness at the girl who had until that day managed to escape his notice. Gore had torn off a nondescript black cape that had covered her head and face, and the golden silk robe she wore. To Quirl, watching from a space of some sixty feet, her beauty came like a shock. He remembered her as Lenore Hyde, whom he had seen only once before as she emerged briefly from her stateroom.

About five feet, six inches tall, her slim figure was dwarfed by the huge bulk of the mate. Her golden hair tumbled over her slim shoulders, almost to her waist, where a tasseled cord held the clinging silk close to her. Her face, so white that it seemed like silver in that gorgeous setting, was cold and defiant. There was no fear in those deep blue eyes under the straight brows—only loathing and contempt.

Gore was not concerned with the personal feelings of his prize. He licked his wide, cruel lips, seizing the girl's arms as in a vise. His other big, dirty hand slipped into the collar of her robe.

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**B**ut the ripping of fabric did not come. Instead there was a sharp crack, and Gore, too surprised even to move, stared at the little man who had hit him.

Again *crack!* The impact of fist on jaw. The blow was too weak to hurt this toughened veteran of countless battles. But slowly a tide of dull red welled up over the bull neck, turning the blue-black jowls to purple, and the walls echoed to Gore's roar of anger.

Again the fists of the smaller man smacked, this time drawing a trickle of blood from Gore's mouth. Then the thick fingers closed on the brave passenger's wrist, and the tremendous muscles swelled as, with a quick movement, Gore thrust his adversary back of him, grasping the other wrist also. Then with slow, irresistible motion, he began drawing the thin arms forward, stretching them, until the unfortunate man, drawn against the barrier of Gore's back, began to shriek with pain.

Still Gore pulled, grinning evilly, and his victim's shoulder blades lifted under the tight skin of his back as they took the strain. Shriek followed shriek, until the guard on the platform glanced furtively out into the central well. There came a dry, tearing crackle as the bones of the arms were drawn out of their sockets, and then the shrieks ceased as merciful unconsciousness came. Gore tossed the limp body carelessly away.

"The beast!" Quirl gritted his teeth. But he stayed where he was, hiding his clenched fist, for his was a specific assignment, and men of the I.F.P. know the meaning of the word "duty."

In a better humor again, Gore looked around.

"Come on, you little ginny!" he chortled. "I see you! Come to Moby, my beauty. You'll be queen of the hold, and this scurvy litter will kiss your feet every day."

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**H**e pursued her as she ran, bowling over or trampling on the fear-stricken prisoners as they tried to scramble out of his way, men and women alike. But she made up in agility what she lacked in strength, lifting up the hem of her robe so that her legs twinkled bare, ducking under Gore's outstretched arms, or leaping over the fallen form of some stumbling, panic-stricken unfortunate.

Only in her eyes was there a true picture of her terror. Gore's uncertain temper was changing again, and in a few moments he was cursing foully, his little red-rimmed eyes glistening, as he dashed after her with short, boar-like rushes.

Again she skimmed past where Quirl cowered in simulated fear, and the look she gave him struck straight at the disguised officer's heart. So it was that when she slipped and fell to her knees, and Gore charged in with a triumphant laugh, Quirl met him with no thought of anything, no feeling but the joy of battle, the delight of a strong man when he meets a foe whom he hates. And to that heady, feral emotion was added the unforgettable picture of a lovely face whose obvious fear was somehow tempered by hope and confidence—in him!

As Gore lunged past, Quirl struck him. It was a short, sharp, well-timed jab that would have knocked out an ordinary man. But Gore was by no means ordinary. The blow laid open his cheek against the jawbone, but Gore scarcely slowed as he swerved. With a bellow of rage, he came straight at Quirl, arms outstretched.

Philosophers have said that no matter how far the human race advances in the sciences, its fundamental reactions will still be atavistic. Gore could have dispatched Quirl in a second with his ray weapon, with perfect safety. Yet it is doubtful that the weapon even entered his mind. As he came to the battle he was driven only by the primitive urge to fight with his hands, to maim, to tear limb from limb like the great simians whom he resembled.

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**T**o Quirl, coolly poised, the picture of Gore did not inspire terror. In the passengers, it did. They saw a brutal giant, gorilla-like, and roaring like a beast, charging at a half-naked youth apparently only half his size. It seemed that those tremendous arms must break him at the first touch.

But the grasping hands slipped off the lithe body as if it were oiled, leaving only angry red welts along Quirl's ribs. As the officer edged away he planted two blows on Gore's nose, which began to bleed freely.

Again Gore rushed, and *spat! spat!* two seemingly light blows landed on his face, opening a cut above his eye and another on his cheek bone. In a few seconds of battling he had become a shocking sight, with his features almost obscured by welling blood.

Again Quirl measured him, and this time, instead of evading the grasp of the mate's eager arms, he stepped right between them. Like a wraith he slipped into their embrace, and before they could grasp him, standing so close that his chest almost touched his adversary's, he whipped a right to Gore's jaw. It was the kind of punch that makes champions, a whiplike lash of the forearm, with relaxed muscles that tighten at the moment of impact. A punch with "follow-through" fit to knock out ninety-nine men out of a hundred.

But it did not knock out Gore, and Quirl had to pay dearly for his error. Gore was staggered, but his mighty arms closed, hugging his slighter opponent to his hairy chest so that the breath was choked out of him, and the metal studs on his harness gouged cruelly into Quirl's flesh. His face was blue before he could work his arm loose, and begin to prod with stiffened fingers at Gore's throat. Gore had to let go then, and Quirl broke away, boxed for a few moments until he had recovered, and then proceeded to chop Gore's face beyond any semblance of humanity.

The mate had dropped his ray weapon, and now searched for it with blinded eyes. He flung his riot club, and it flew wide of the mark. It was obvious that he was going to be beaten into insensibility.

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**T**he guard on the platform, seeing the trend of the battle, shouted hoarsely up the well, and in a few minutes four men, hard-bitten, villainous looking fellows, tumbled down the ladder and joyously joined in the fray. It was then only a matter of seconds before Quirl lay on the floor-plates, battered and bleeding, but still feebly fighting, while Gore sat astride him, seeking with vicious fingers for Quirl's eyes. At the same time his men were kicking at the helpless man's body wherever they could reach him.

At the sight of this brutality the other prisoners, forgetting for the moment their own cowed condition, set up such a bedlam of noise that the guard began to look furtively up the passage, and to shout at the ruffians.

Suddenly he was whirled aside, and a figure in uniform, moving with uncanny speed for a man so massive, appeared upon the platform and bounded down the ladder. He was among the struggling men on the floor in a moment, and became a maze of flailing arms and legs. Like ten-pins the pirates scattered, and the giant pulled off the mate. Gore could not see, but as he writhed he knew he was in the grip of the pirate captain. Captain Strom's harsh, ascetic face was dangerous, and his steely gray eyes compelling. The men managed slovenly salutes.

"Gore," Strom snapped, "have your men get some water and mop up this blood. How many times have I told you to quit mauling the prisoners? D'ye think I'm in this business to provide amusement for you? Henceforth keep out of this hold. Hear?"

"Yes, sir," Gore muttered sullenly.

"Took five of you bums to handle him, did it?" Strom remarked sardonically, stooping to pick up the unconscious Quirl. He carried him easily, up the ladder. As they disappeared Strom's voice boomed out:

"Dr. Stoddard! Stoddard! Messenger, have Stoddard report at my cabin."

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**T**he mate was wiping the blood off his face with a rag.

"I tried to call yer," the guard whined.

"That tears it!" Gore exclaimed fiercely, bursting into a string of abuse. But one of his henchmen nudged him.

"Keep yer tongue in yer face, Gore, till the time comes."

Gore said nothing, but glared savagely at the prisoners.

"Get the buckets and mops!" he snarled at his men, and they fled precipitately.

A long, wailing noise came through the hatch:

"Soopson! S-o-o-pson!"

"Here comes yer grub, damn you," Gore growled at the prisoners in general. A shuffling sound followed the singsong call, and then a "galley boy" of forty years or so, badly crippled by club-feet, shuffled up to the hatch and laboriously let himself down to the platform. The huge bowl of stew he was carrying was far too heavy for him, and his strained, thin face was beady with sweat.

"Get a move on, Sorko!" Gore bellowed up at him. "Get your swill down here. Some o' these swine are goin' short this time, anyway."

Sorko set the big bowl down at the top of the steps and began to descend backward. Then he resumed his burden.

But he was nervous, and had barely started when his crippled feet, far too big for his thin shanks, became entangled. He gave a giddy shriek and fell over backward, landing on his back, and lay still. His pale, freckled face became greenish.

But the bowl, filled to the brim by its greasy, scalding hot contents, flew in a sweeping parabola, tipping as it fell, so that the entire contents cascaded on Gore, drenching him from head to foot. Howling with rage and pain he danced around. He was utterly beside himself. When he was able to see he rushed for Sorko, who was moaning with returning consciousness, and picked up the frail body to hurl it against the floor.

"Stop, or you're dead!"

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**T**hat voice, so incisive and clear, was a woman's. Gore found himself looking into the little twin funnels of his own ray projector. They were filled with a milky light, and the odor of ozone was strong. The girl had only to press the trigger and a powerful current would leap along the path of those ionizing beams. And Gore would murder no more.

Stupidly, he let Sorko slide to the floor, where the poor fellow recovered sufficiently from his paralyzing fright and his fall to scuttle away.

Looking past the menacing weapon, Gore saw the girl, Lenore Hyde. Her limpid eyes under their straight brows were blazing, and he read in them certain death for himself.

"Up that ladder!" she ordered sharply, "and stay out! Guard, when this beast is gone I will give you this weapon. Now, connect up your skipper."

Too surprised to disobey, the guard threw the televisor switch, and in a moment Strom's stern face appeared on the screen. He comprehended the situation immediately.

"Do as she says," he ordered brusquely. "Stoddard is coming to take care of that man of hers that Gore beat up."

A few minutes later she was tearfully assisting the ship's doctor to put the man with the dislocated shoulders on a stretcher.

"Your husband?" asked Stoddard, who resembled a starved gray rat.

"My brother," she exclaimed simply.

"Want to take care of him?" And at her eager assent, he said, "Can't afford to let him die. Your family got money?"

"Yes, yes! They will pay anything—anything—to get him back safely."

The doctor grinned with satisfaction.

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**M**emory returned to Quirl with the realization that he was lying on a metal bunk in an outside stateroom, where he could see the orderly procession of the stars through the floor ports as the ship rotated. His body was racked with pain, and his head seemed enormous. His sensation, he

discovered, was due to a thick swathing of bandages.

As he stirred something moved in an adjoining bunk, and Dr. Stoddard's peaked face came into view.

"How do you feel?" he asked professionally.

"Rotten!"

"We'll fix that." He left, returning a few minutes later with a portable apparatus somewhat resembling its progenitor, the diathermy generator. He disposed a number of insulated loops about Quirl's body and head, connecting them through flexible cables to his machine. As a gentle humming began, Quirl was conscious of an agreeable warmth, of a quickening all over his body. A great lassitude followed, and he slept.

When he awoke again Captain Strom was standing beside him. He had taken off his coat, and his powerful body filled the blouse he was wearing. He had evidently just come off duty, for he still had on his blue trousers, with the stripes of gold braid down the sides.

"It may interest you, Mr. Finner, that I have selected you as one of the chosen," he remarked casually.

"One of the chosen what?"

"The chosen race. You didn't take me for an out-and-out damned pirate, did you?"

"Excuse me if I seem dumb!" Quirl hoisted himself on his elbow. "Yes, I figure you're a pirate. What else?"

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**S**tom's stern face relaxed in a smile. It was a strange smile, inscrutably melancholy. It revealed, beneath the hardness of a warrior, something else; the idealism of a poet. When he spoke again it was with a strange gentleness:

"To attain one's end, one must make use of many means, and sometimes to disguise one's purpose. For instance, it is perfectly proper for an officer of the I.F.P. to disguise himself like a son of the idle rich in order to lay the infamous 'Scourge' by the heels, isn't it?"

Quirl felt himself redden. And a cold fear seemed to overwhelm him. He realized that Strom was a zealot, and he knew he would not hesitate to kill. This prompt penetration of his disguise was something he had not bargained for.

"What makes you think," he asked shortly, "that I'm an I.F.P. man?"

"The fight you gave Gore and his men. Do you expect me to think that a coupon clipper could have done that? I know the way of—"

He checked himself. Quirl said:

"My people have money. I don't know what you mean about—"

"Oh, yes, you do," Strom interrupted. "If you were what you claim to be perhaps I would let you go for the ransom, though you took my eye from the first."

"The ransom will be paid."

"It will not. You will be one of those who do not return. There is only one price I will accept from you."

"Yes? What is that?"

"The formula of the new etheric ray."

"I don't know the I.F.P. secrets. I told you that."

"You know how to operate the ray. All its men do. I want you to tell me what you know. I can deduce the rest."

---

**Q**uirl thought rapidly. Strom was right. The I.F.P. had developed a new ray that was far superior to the ionizer ray, for the latter required an atmosphere of some kind for its operation, while the new one would work equally well in a vacuum.

"I never heard of any," he lied stubbornly. "Anyway, what do you want a ray for? Your guns, with no gravity to interfere and no air to stop the bullets, have just about unlimited range, haven't they?"

"Spoken like a soldier!" Again Strom permitted himself a brief triumphant smile. "And we have the further advantage of invisibility. The ship is surrounded by a net of wires that create a field of

force which bend light rays around us. That explains why your men have never caught us. But to get back to our subject. I will tell you something. Do you know who I am?"

Quirl looked at him. Strom appeared to be at least sixty years old. But the fine, erect figure, the rugged features told nothing.

"Did you ever hear of Lieutenant Burroughs?" Strom asked casually.

"Burroughs—the man without a planet!" Quirl ejaculated. "Are you Burroughs, the traitor?" Immediately he regretted his heedlessness. Strom's face darkened in anger, and for a moment the pirate captain did not reply. When he did he was a little calmer.

"Traitor they called me!" he exclaimed vehemently. "I a traitor—the most loyal man in the solar system guard. Surrounded by rottenness and intrigue—

"But you wouldn't know. You were but a lad learning to fly your first toy helics when that happened. Years later the Martian Cabal was exposed, and the leading plotters—the traitors—were punished. But that was not till later, and the court's irreversible decree against me had been carried out. I, the unsuspecting messenger, the loyal, eager dupe, was made the cat's-paw. I was put on an old, condemned freighter, with food and supplies supposed to last me a lifetime, but with no power capsules and no means of steering the ship. I was set adrift in a derelict on a lonely orbit of exile around the sun—the man without a planet!

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**P**icture that, lad. That rusty, dead old cylinder, coursing around and around the sun, and inside, sitting on his bales and boxes, a young man like you. A young man in the pride and prime of his life, expiating the treason that had betrayed him. Day after day, through the thick ports, I saw the same changeless scene. And every two years, when I drew near the Earth, I watched the beautiful green ball of it, with what bitter longings! As I watched it dwindle away again into the blackness of space, I thought of the fortunate, selfish, stupid and cruel beings who lived on it, and hated them. They had banished me, an innocent man, to whirl forever and ever around the sun, in my steel tomb!

"But that cruel judgment was never executed. Seven years ago this Gore found me. He is an escaped convict, and he came in a little five-man rocket he had stolen. We loaded up all of the supplies the little ship would hold, for Gore had no food, and escaped to Titan, landing on an island on the side opposite to where the mines are.

"Gore wanted to become a pirate, and as he could get men, I consented. He scraped them up, fugitives from justice, every one of them. We built this ship, and I invented the invisibility field of force—"

"Just a moment," Quirl interrupted, vastly interested. "I saw your ship through the ports that day."

"True. The presence of your ship in the field distorted it so much that it was ineffective. But at all other times—right now—we are utterly invisible. One of the I.F.P. patrols may pass within a mile of us and never see us.

"As we raided the interplanetary commerce, I began to weed out the people we captured. Those that showed the highest intelligence, sense of justice and physical perfection I selected to be the nucleus of a new race, to be kept on Titan for a time and then to be transplanted to a new planet of one of the nearer solar systems.

"My principal trouble is with the crew. They can collect ransom only on those I reject, and there are constant clashes between me and Gore. It is now my intention to let them go their way, and to fit out a new ship, with a new crew. I offer you the place of first mate."

"No!" Quirl replied crisply. "You say you understand the honor of the Force, and then offer me a job pirating with you. No, thanks!"

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**S**trom, or Burroughs, made no attempt to conceal his disappointment. The recital of his wrongs had brought out the bitter lines of his face, and the weariness of one who plays his game alone and can call no one friend.

"I should have known better," he said quietly. "There was none more loyal to the I.F.P. than I—when I still belonged to it. Yet, I thought if I laid all my cards before you—You realize what this means?"

"Yes," Quirl replied soberly. "It means you will never dare to let me be ransomed nor to free me among your selected people. It means—death!"

"Not death! I will parole you."

Quirl felt an overmastering surge of sympathy. He saw this pirate as later historians have come



to see him—a man of lofty and noble purpose who was made the victim of shrewder, meaner minds in the most despicable interplanetary imbroglio ever to disgrace a solar system. The thought of his own fate, should he refuse the offer, did not depress Quirl as much as the necessity of heaping more disappointment on this deeply wronged "man without a planet."

"Captain," he said slowly, with deep regret. "You remember the I.F.P. oath?" And at the other's flush he hurried on. "Knowing that oath you know what my answer must be. Put me in irons or kill me!"

"I know," Strom added wistfully. "Would you—if I could just once more shake the clean hand of a brave man and a gentleman—"

Quirl's hand shot out and gripped the long, powerful fingers of the pirate captain.

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Quirl was willing to compromise to the extent of not revealing anything to the other passengers, for the privilege of being kept in the prison hold rather than in solitary confinement. Here he would be under the vigilant eye of a guard, with possibly less chance of effecting an escape in some way, but he felt a great desire to be near the girl Lenore, and to know that she was safe and in good spirits.

They fastened him by means of a light chain and hoop that locked around his waist to a staple set in the floor near one wall. The other prisoners regarded him as a hero, for since the day of the epic fight the mate had kept away, and they had been treated with tolerable decency. Quirl was able to cheer them up with predictions that the most of them would be eligible to ransom. But as he looked at the pale beauty of Lenore he felt grave misgivings, for he knew that a man of Strom's discernment would want her for his projected Utopia without question.

She did not speak to him while the hero-worshipping crowd were fluttering about him to their heart's content. When they finally left him alone she came up to him silently, and sat on the floor beside him.

"I want to thank you," she said quietly, clearly, "for what you did for me and my brother, Mr.—"

"Finner. Quirl Finner. I have thought of you as Lenore, and wondered how you were. How long has it been since they took me out? You see—" he grinned, "I was asleep."

"Five days. At least, they turned off the lights five times for the sleeping periods."

"The man who fought for you—how is he?"

"My brother—is dead!"

Quirl looked away so that he should not see the quick tears springing to her eyes. But a few moments later he felt her cool hand on his scarred forehead, and she was smiling bravely.

"Tragedies such as these, Quirl, were common in the lives of our ancestors. They were able to bear them, and we can bear them. All his life my poor brother has lived as a gentleman, sheltered, protected by class barriers. When he died of pneumonia caused by the jagged end of a broken rib—so Dr. Stoddard says—I think he had a lively sense of satisfaction that he should end in such a way. If it had not been for me—"

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She came to him often, after that, to sit quietly by his side, and to bring his food to him from the big community bowl which even the most fastidious of the prisoners had come to look forward to. She told of her life as the daughter of a capitalist who owned large mine holdings on Titan. It would be about time for the *Celestia* to reach Titan, and her non-arrival would be causing anxiety to Lenore's father awaiting her there. The void would be swarming with I.F.P. patrols, but as the pirate ship was invisible nothing would be found but the mysteriously looted and abandoned *Celestia*.

There was no longer any reason for concealing from her the fact that he himself was a member of the I.F.P., and Quirl told Lenore of the adventurous life he and his companions had led. Of forays to far-away and as yet undisciplined Pluto, of tropical Venus and Mercury, where the rains never cease, of the hostile and almost unknown planet of Aryl, within the orbit of Mercury, where no man has ever seen a true image of the landscape because of the stupendous and never-ending mirages.

As time passed they were drawn together by the bonds of propinquity and mutual interest—this obscure police officer and the daughter of one of the most powerful men in the solar system. But Quirl did not name his love, for always there was the grim present of their captivity, the ghastly uncertainty of the future.

The little "galley boy" Sorko seemed daily more frail. Apparently the fall he had sustained had done him some internal injury. Often the guard, with many a ribald comment, had to help him get his emptied bowl back up the ladder.

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One day he seemed overcome by great weakness. Staggering, he held his hand to his sweat-dewed forehead. Erratically he waltzed across the floor, to crumple in a heap where Quirl and the girl were sitting. Moved by compassion, Lenore composed his body in a more comfortable position, and with a bit of handkerchief moistened the pirate's wrinkled, old-young face with some of Quirl's drinking water. The guard looked on indifferently.

"Guard!" Quirl shouted. "He's going to die. Come and take him to the lazaret."

"Sez you!" returned the guard callously. "Me, I stay on post till relieved. Sorko'll be all right. He's been throwin' them fits right regular."

Sorko's lips moved feebly, and Lenore bent down to catch his words. They were barely audible:

"I'm all right, lady. You done me a good turn when you made Gore put me down, and I'm doin' you one now. I wouldn't do this for no one else." He gasped.

"Water!" Lenore exclaimed sharply, and Quirl handed her the rest of his cup.

"Ain't water he wants," the amused guard observed. "The blighter's playin' for a good chew of merclite!"<sup>[1]</sup>

[1] Merclite, a highly stimulating gum. It was prohibited by interplanetary proclamation, but was always obtainable through the surreptitious channels of a highly profitable traffic.

"I ain't as bad as I'm makin' out," Sorko whispered. "Got to do it to tell you this, 'cause you was square with me. Gore is fixin' to have a mut'ny. Kill captain, kill all these dubs here—this guy of yourn, too. He wants to take you for his—" the weazened little face twisted in unwonted shy delicacy—"take you for him, pretty lady. I don't want him to. I'm not—a—bad feller—"

"What the hell, Sorko!" the puzzled guard exclaimed over the delay. "You bandy-legged rat, get up there, or I'll give you a jolt."

Lenore looked up, indignant.

"You heartless wretch! Would you let this man—"

"Comin'!" Sorko scrambling to his feet, shuffling to the table, where he retrieved his bowl. Quirl and Lenore watched his painful progress up the ladder, until at last he disappeared into the passage.

"Quirl," she murmured, as her hand sought his, "take this."

He felt a small bit of metal, and looking at it cautiously, saw that he had a rough key, filed out of a piece of flat metal.

"The key to that hoop around your waist. He copied it from the one the captain has, I suppose."

---

**H**is hopes high all at once, Quirl sought the compact little lock in the small of his back. It took a long time to get the key in, and then it would not turn. It had been unskillfully made, and was probably not a true reproduction. Nevertheless, by constant effort, he succeeded at last in turning it, and was rewarded by hearing a faint click. He tested the hoop, felt it slip, and knew that at any time he chose he could free himself.

"Lenore, dear," he told her. "Go with the other women now. We must do nothing to make the guard suspicious. We don't know when this mutiny is to come off, but we are close to Saturn now; it can't be long. Go now."

"Good-by, dear. Be careful!"

It seemed an eternity until the emanation disk became dim and went out and the prisoners made sleepy sounds. A relief guard took station, and the ship became silent, so that one could hear the rumbling of the propelling rockets. As there were no ports in this hold, there was no light whatever except the faint glow that came from the central passage above the platform. Against this the pirate was outlined as he sat on his stool. As Quirl's eyes became accustomed to the darkness he could see the play of faint highlights on his muscular torso, and so he waited.

He thought over the situation. The safest and easiest course would be to create such a disturbance that Captain Strom would be attracted to the scene. This would probably not involve anything more than a severe beating for himself, and he would then find opportunity to acquaint Strom with the projected mutiny somehow. That Strom would know how to deal with it he never doubted. Lenore might then still be forcibly impressed as a citizen of Strom's new planet, but at least she would not be exposed to the infinitely worse fate of becoming the plaything of Gore and his villainous crew.

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The flaw of this plan was that Quirl himself would still be under practical sentence of death. Strom would not let his gratitude carry him so far as to release a man who knew as much as Quirl did, and who would not promise to keep his secrets.

The preferable, though far more dangerous course was to strike before the mutineers could. Quirl knew something about the structure of the ship. It was built around the tubular passage, and every hold or group of rooms opened on this well, from the bow where the navigators were to the stern where the rockets were located. Somewhere there would be a generating room where the invisibility field was being produced. If he could find this and wreck the generators one of the I.F.P. ships with which this part of space doubtless swarmed, would sight them, and after that everything was in the hands of fate.

Quirl nervously waited for the guard to nod. At any moment he expected to hear a hellish bedlam break loose—the beginning of the mutiny. And the guard seemed alert. There was nothing to do but take a chance.

Quirl sighed as if he were turning in his sleep, so that the clink of the released chain would not seem out of place. The guard did not stir. Slowly, very slowly, Quirl crept across the floor. He had been robbed of all his clothing except his torn silk trousers; and his boots were gone, so he was able to move as quietly as a cat.

With tense silence he ascended the ladder, praying that his weight would not send up a warning vibration. But his luck held. He was nearly at the top before it broke.

"Take him off! Take him off!" It was an eery, strangled shriek from one of the male prisoners in the throes of a nightmare. With a startled curse the guard thudded to his feet, peered tensely into the darkness, his weapon sending twin milky beams of the powerful ionizing ray toward the source of the sound.

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The dreamer had awakened, still gasping in the grip of fear, and other disturbed sleepers were grumbling.

"Better go easy, you fools," the pirate warned them. "Yer just in luck that I didn't let loose a couple bolts on ye. Got a good notion to do it, anyway." He played the dangerous little spots of light around, amused as the prisoners scrambled for safety, but with no real intention of releasing the deadly electric charge along the paths provided for it. This cruel pleasure cost him his life. As he turned his back Quirl leaped. His iron-hard forearm rose and fell, and the edge of his hand came down on the back of the pirate's thick neck. There was a muffled crack and he slumped to the platform grating.

Quickly the officer stripped off the man's harness and buckled it around his own naked chest. The electrogun had been uninjured, and hooked to the belt was also the riot club, a truly appalling thing at close quarters. Quirl carried the body down, laid it prone in the corner he had occupied, snapped on the waistlock, and threw a ragged old blanket over the hairy legs. In the forthcoming disturbance, if anyone looked in, he would think the inert form a sleeping prisoner, and that the guard had deserted post.

Quirl had feared an outbreak among the prisoners, but they were so apathetic that they paid little attention. Perhaps they thought it was Quirl who had been killed, and he did not dare even a whispered farewell to the girl he knew was watching somewhere in the darkness.

Much to Quirl's delight, the long, tubular passage was deserted. Here the centrifugal gravity was less than it had been in the hold. A weird place, this central tube, where every direction was down, and a man could walk on his ceiling, his floor, his walls with equal facility. No top nor bottom—just a long, smooth tube with numerous enigmatic doors leading to—where?

At least it was easy to tell where the bow of the ship was. A light shone through a transom over the door to the navigating room. Should he try to hold up the navigating officer? He decided against that. There would be at least three men in there, and it was the custom to keep those quarters locked.

"If only I knew where they generate the invisibility field!" he muttered, as he stood irresolute.

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Opportunity came at that moment. A crack of light appeared along the passage. A door was opening there. A moment later a head and shoulders showed. Someone was climbing up. Swiftly the officer ran to the place. The pirate did not even suspect anything wrong until he felt the spots of milky light on his face. He showed his terror plainly.

"Get up!" Quirl hissed. The man obeyed with alacrity. Quirl glanced down. He saw tiers of bunks, evidently one of the crew's dormitories.

He now turned to the cowering pirate.

"I'd as soon kill you as not!" Quirl snarled.

"You got me wrong, brother!" the pirate whined. "I'm with Gore in this deal. Lay off!"

"Where you bound for?"

"I have to relieve Burke at the ventilating turbines."

"Let Burke wait. Lead on to the invisibility generators."

"Oh, I can't do that, mister! I got to have a pass. Say, mister, I was just kidding about being one of Gore's men. I'm for the cap'n, yes, sir!"

"You lying scum!" Quirl barked impatiently. "Get going!"

The white-faced and bewildered pirate led the way down the tube to the after end. He unlatched a door and tried to enter, but as soon as he had dropped through to the platform he was met by a guard with leveled ionizer.

"This gem'man," he started to explain. But Quirl dropped after him and gave him a powerful shove, so that he crashed into the guard. The latter pulled the trigger, and the unfortunate pirate crashed over the platform's edge to the floor. Quirl had out his own electrogun and dispatched the guard. At the same time he felt a stunning shock. His senses reeled, but the grating had taken part of the discharge loosed by a pirate electrician at the foot of the ladder. Quirl threw his riot club and followed that up with another lightning bolt.

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**H**e was then the only living person in the room, in which two generators hummed softly. Connected to them was a bank of U-shaped tubes, each as tall as a man, which were filled with silent livid fire. Quirl picked up a wrench and started hammering at the thick tubes until the glass cracked. Each time he was engulfed by a wave of heat, and the tube became black. The great generators idled and automatically came to a stop. Quirl was certain now that the pirate ship would be visible, but the position of the captives was still desperate. He hoped that none of the surviving pirates would think of calling at the generator room, or find out in some other way that they were now visible in the eternal day of space.

Quietly he climbed back to the passage and closed the hatch. He cast about for his next move. He was looking toward the bow, but on hearing the subdued clink of metal on metal, he turned.

A dozen of the pirates were coming toward him.

It would have been useless to draw his weapon. Theirs were out and could have burned him to a crisp before he could move. Silently and with deadliness apparent in every move they approached him.

"Hope they try to capture me alive!" he thought. "What a dog-fight that'll be!"

Now they were nearly up to him.

"Come along, you fool!" barked the leader of the group as they were all around him. "Sapheads like you'll give the whole game away."

Quirl could have laughed. This was evidently part of the mutineers' crew bent on their errand of murder. In the dim light they had taken him for one of their number. He went with them, meekly.

"Unlocked!" The leader whom Quirl had not seen before, exclaimed with satisfaction. He pulled the hatch open softly and the hinges had been oiled. Quietly as panthers they descended the ladder. They stood at the bottom. Still another door barred the way. Quirl now realized that they were attacking the captain's quarters. But the leader produced a key, and silently swung the door open.

"So, you dogs! You've come!"

---

**L**ike an infuriated bull Captain Strom charged them, a riot club in each hand. He could have killed them all with a ray, but he chose to vent in physical action his consuming anger at their treachery, which he had in some way anticipated. Three or four went sprawling under his mighty blows. The others sought shelter behind tables and chests, and began stabbing at him with their electroguns. Electricity crackled, and the air became pungent with ozone. A pair of the twin rays struck the captain's gold braid, and he went down. With a triumphant yell a man dashed at him, murderous club up-raised. But Quirl was faster, and the pirate fell dead with a crushed skull.

Strom was up again, fighting beside Quirl. The pirates remaining fell under their furious blows, and the two dashed out. Strom said nothing, and Quirl was not sure that he had been recognized. The captain charged straight for the navigating bow. Here, unless he should be attacked by the I.F.P. he could still control the situation. He was perhaps still ignorant of the ship's visibility.

But Quirl made for the prisoners' hold. They would be cowering there, probably in darkness, not

knowing what was going on. It was his intention to rally them, provide them with the weapons of the fallen pirates, and so be in a position to advantageously make terms with whoever was victorious in this battle.

He saw, as he approached that the light was on. He was hardly a dozen feet away when the door was darkened. Quirl did not have to hear her cry to know that Gore had Lenore.

---

**R**unning with remarkable speed, the mate carried his prize toward the after end of the tube. A hatch stood open there, and he dropped through, slamming it after him.

Quirl picked up a bar that someone had dropped. It was but a matter of moments to break the lock and pull open the hatch. The hold was lighted, and empty. In its middle, holding the helpless Lenore, stood Gore, the electrogun in his hand covering the platform.

"Boy scout to the rescue again!" Gore sneered. He was even more repulsive than before, with the marks Quirl had left on him in the last battle. But he was fearless and utterly reckless. "Well, m'lad, I know when I'm done. And when a fellow's done he don't care what happens. So here's the lay: When I get out of here, I'll be dead. And *she'll* be dead, or you'll wish she was. Get it? She'll be killed, too, if you jolt me—the shock'll pass to her. And the first man-jack who crosses that grating'll get his from me. Now then, go ahead and pull! Goin' to kill us both, or leave her to me?" He laughed defiantly, like one who counts himself already dead.

Quirl tentatively placed one foot on the platform. Instantly a fat spark jumped from the metal to his foot, and sent him sprawling into the tube. He saw Strom coming toward him. He had killed his enemies in the control room and was now on the hunt for more.

"Thanks for what you did," he grunted. As a forlorn hope, Quirl explained the situation. Strom smiled a rare smile.

"That's all right," he said mildly. "Quirl, you're a square man, and I'd rather do something for a square enemy than a false friend. Oh, I can do it cheaply. The jig's up for me, anyway!"

Quickly he dropped through the door and launched himself. Gore saw him coming, and Strom's body shuddered as the bolt struck squarely. He was dead when he hit, but his great weight knocked Gore down.

---

**Q**uirl had time to jump after him, knocking the wind out of Gore before he could rise. Lenore picked up Gore's weapon, but dared not use it for fear of injuring her lover. As the two fighting men circled warily, seeking openings in this battle that must be fatal to one of them, they did not see the slight, shadowy figure that dropped down to them. There was a flash, and Gore slumped, a knife in his back.

"I done it! I done for him!" chattered Sorko. "The dirty, lousy—"

"Come, Lenore, let's get up to the bow before the pirates think of it." They dashed up the ladder. Some more of the disks were out, and it was nearly dark. Three sinewy forms pounced on Quirl the moment he entered the passage. The girl, too, was caught, though she fought and bit.

"Lights! Let's have some lights!" commanded an authoritative voice.

"Coming, sir!" came a far-away answer.

The passage became bright, and Quirl looked into the faces of his captors, in the uniforms of the I.F.P.

"Got you, you dirty pirate!" gloated the husky young man on his chest.

"Mike!" Quirl gasped, "don't you know me? How'd you get here?"

"Dog-gone! Finner! Leggo his legs, you eggs."

"Trailed you," he added. "Glommed our magnets on the navigating bow. Expected a fight, but some big guy let us in through an airlock. Well, he'd done plenty of scrapping—all the clothes torn off him. Half a dozen dead pirates in there. Who is he?"

Quirl thought of the stiffening body of Lieutenant Burroughs, alias Captain Strom, who had just purchased his life and that of Lenore at the cost of his own. Was his undeserved shame now to follow him to his grave? Quirl was no lawyer, and he decided not to take any chances with the law's mercy. He said:

"I don't know his name. A prisoner from some other ship, I think. He was very homesick for Earth, and I'll see he gets a decent grave on Earth. He died to save me."

"As for the lady," he added, "let her go. She's a captive. And, anyway, I think she is the future Mrs. Quirl Finner."

She smiled, and the men of the Force looked somewhat enviously at Quirl.

"Say," Quirl said, taking Lenore's hand and anxious to be rid of them, "if you find a little monkey-faced guy down in that hold, go easy with him. He's a good man, too, and I'm going to recommend his pardon."

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