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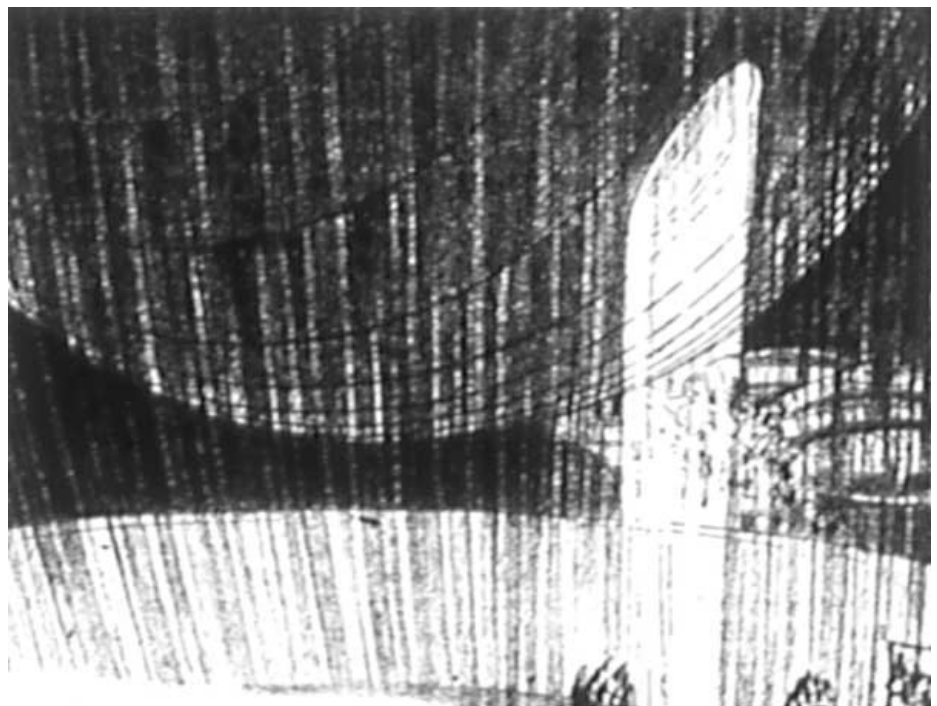
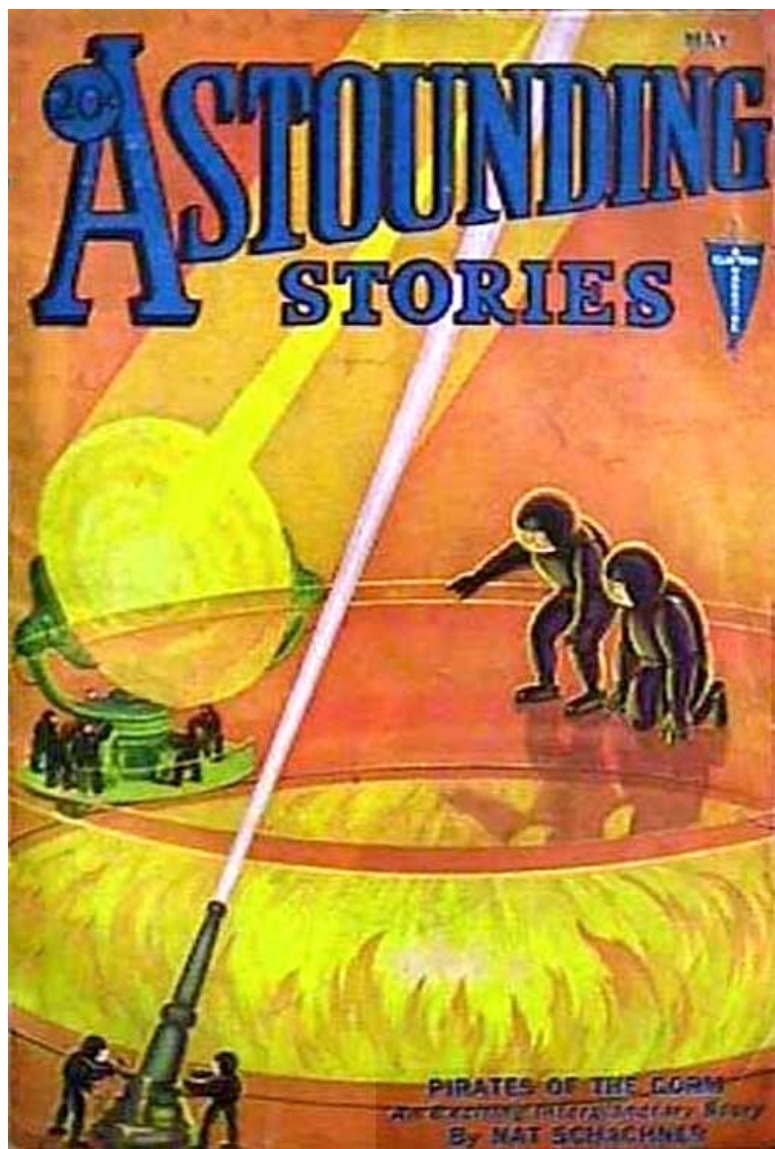
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PIRATES OF THE GORM ***

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Pirates of the Gorm



He jumped--directly over the Gorm!

Grant Pemberton sat up suddenly in his berth, every sense straining and alert. What was it that had awakened him in the deathly stillness of the space-flier? His right hand slid under the pillow and clutched the handle of his gun. Its firm coolness was a comforting reality.

The trail of vanished space ships leads Grant Pemberton to a marvellous lake of fire.

There it was again. A tiny scratching on the door as though someone was fumbling for the slide-switch. Very quietly he sat, waiting, his finger poised against the trigger. Suddenly the scratching ceased, and the panel moved slowly open. A thin oblong patch glimmered in the light of the corridor beyond. Grant tensed grimly.

A hand moved slowly around the slit—a hand that held a pencil-ray. Even in the dim illumination, Grant noted the queer spatulate fingers. A Ganymedan! In the entire solar system only they had those strange appendages.

Pemberton catapulted out of his berth like a flash. Not a moment too soon, either. A pale blue beam slithered across the blackness, impinged upon the pillow where his head had lain only a moment before. The air-cushion disintegrated into smoldering dust. Grant's weapon spat viciously. A hail of tiny bullets rattled against the panel, and exploded, each in a puffball of flame.

But it was too late. Already the unknown enemy was running swiftly down the corridor, the sucking patter of his feet giving more evidence of his Ganymedan origin. Pemberton sprang to the door, thrust it open just in time to see a dark shape disappearing around a bend in the corridor. There was no use of pursuit; the passageway ended in a spray of smaller corridors, from which ambush would be absurdly easy.

He glanced swiftly around. The corridor was empty, silent in the dim, diffused light. The motley passengers were all sound asleep; no one had been disturbed by the fracas. Earthmen, green-faced Martians, fish-scaled Venusians, spatulate Ganymedans and homeward-bound Callistans, all reposing through the sleep-period in anticipation of an early landing in Callisto.

All were asleep, that is, but one. That brought Pemberton back to the problem of his mysterious assailant. Why had this Ganymedan tried to whiff him out of existence? Grant frowned. No one on board knew of his mission, not even the captain. On the passenger list he was merely Dirk Halliday, an inconspicuous commercial traveler for Interspace Products. Yet someone had manifestly penetrated his disguise and was eager to remove him from the path of whatever devilry was up. Who?

Grant gave a little start, then swore softly. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before! The scene came back to him, complete in every detail, as though he were once more back on Earth, in the small, simply furnished office of the Interplanetary Secret Service.

The Chief of the Service was glancing up at him keenly. Beside him was a tall, powerfully

shouldered Ganymedan, Miro, Inspector for Ganymede. Grant looked at him with a faint distaste as he sat there, drumming on the arm of his chair with his spatulate fingers, his soft-suction padded hoofs curled queerly under the seat. There was something furtive, too, about the red lidless eyes that shifted with quick unwinking movements.

But then, Pemberton had small use for the entire tribe of Ganymedans. Damned pirates, that's all they were. It was not many years back since they had been the scourge of the solar system, harrying spatial commerce with their swift piratical fliers, burning and slaying for the mere lust of it.

That is, until an armada of Earth space-fliers had broken their power in one great battle. The stricken corsairs were compelled to disgorge their accumulations of plunder, give up all their fliers and armament, and above all, the import of metals was forbidden them. For, strangely enough, none of the metallic elements was to be found on Ganymede. All their weapons, all their ships, were forged of metals from the other planets.

It was now five years since Ganymede had been admitted once again to the Planetary League, after suitable declarations of repentance. But the prohibitions still held. And Grant placed small faith in the sincerity of the repentance.

The Chief was speaking.

"We've called you in—Miro and I," he said, in his usual swift, staccato manner, "because we've agreed that you are the best man in the Service to handle the mission we have in mind."

Grant said nothing.

"It's a particularly dangerous affair," the Chief continued. "Five great space-fliers, traveling along regular traffic routes, have all vanished within the space of a month—passengers, crews and all. Not a trace of them can be found."

"No radio reports, sir?"

"That's the most curious part of the whole business. Everyone of the fliers was equipped with apparatus that could have raised the entire solar system with a call for help, and yet not the tiniest whisper was heard."

The Chief got up and paced the floor agitatedly. It was plain that this business was worrying him. Miro continued to sit calmly, seemingly indifferent. "It's uncanny, I tell you. Gone as though empty space had swallowed them up."

"You've applied routine methods, of course," Grant ventured.

"Of course," the Chief waved it aside impatiently. "But we can't discover a thing. Battle fliers have patrolled the area without success. The last ship was literally snatched away right under the nose of a convoy. One minute it was in radio communication, and the next—whiff—it was gone."

"Where is this area you mention?" Already Pemberton's razor-edged brain was at work on the problem.

"Within a radius of five million miles from Jupiter. We've naturally considered placing an embargo upon that territory, but that would mean cutting off all of the satellites from the rest of the system."

Miro stirred. His smooth slurred voice rolled out.

"And my planet would suffer, my friend. Alas, it has already suffered too much." He evoked a sigh from somewhere in the depths of his barrel chest, and tried to cast up his small red eyes.

Grant suffered too, a faint disgust. Damn his eyes, what business had an erstwhile pirate, not too recently reformed, being self-righteous?

"Miro thinks," the Chief continued unheeding, "that the Callistans know more about this than they admit. He has a theory that Callisto is somehow gathering up these ships to use in a surprise attack against his own planet, Ganymede. He says Callisto has always hated them."

"Damn good reason," Grant said laconically.

Miro's lidless eyes flamed into sudden life. "And what do you mean by that, my friend?"

Pemberton replied calmly. "Simply that your people have harried and ravaged them for untold centuries. They were your nearest prey, you know."

Miro sprang to his feet, his soft suction pads gripping the floor as though preparatory to a spring. Gone was the sanctimonious unctious of his former behavior; the ruthless savage glared out of the red eyes, the flattened fingers were twisting and curling.

"You beastly Earthling," he cried in a voice choked with rage, "I'll—"

The Chief intervened swiftly. "Here, none of that," he said sharply to Miro. "Don't say anything you'll regret later." Then he turned to Grant, who was steadily holding his ground: "There was no reason, Pemberton, to insult an inspector of the Service. Consider yourself reprimanded." But the edge of the rebuke was taken off by the slight twinkle in the Chief's eye.

Somehow a truce was patched up. Grant was to ship as an ordinary passenger on the *Althea*, the great passenger liner that plied between Callisto and the Earth. It was not his duty to prevent the disappearance of the vessel, the Chief insisted, but to endeavor to discover the cause. It was up to Grant then to escape, if he could, and to report to Miro on Ganymede immediately with his findings. Miro was leaving by his private Service flier at once for Ganymede, to await him. Grant thought he saw a faint sardonic gleam in the Inspector's eyes at that, but paid no particular heed to it at the time.

Now, as Grant stood in the corridor of the great space-flier, listening intently for further sounds from his hidden foe, it flashed on him. Miro knew he was on board. It was a Ganymedan who had treacherously attacked him. The puzzle was slowly fitting its pieces together. But the major piece still eluded him. What would happen to the ship?

As he turned to go back to his room, a ripping, tearing, grinding sound came to his startled ears. It was followed by a sudden swishing noise. Grant knew what that meant. A meteor had ripped into the vitals of the space-flier, and the precious air was rushing through the fissure into outer space. He whirled without an instant's hesitation and sprang down the long corridor toward the captain's quarters. If caught in time, the hole could be plugged.

Even as he ran, there was another grinding smash, then another, and another. Good Lord, they must have headed right into a meteor shower. Panels were sliding open, and people, scantily attired, thrust startled heads out into the corridor. Someone called after him, but he did not heed or stop his headlong race. He must get to the control room at once.

Already the air in the corridor was a sucking whirlpool that beat and eddied about him in its mad rush to escape. It sounded like the drumbeat of unsilenced exploders. A meteor shower of unprecedented proportions! In the back of Grant's mind as he ran, hammered a thought. Every swarm of meteors in the solar system was carefully plotted. The lanes of travel were routed to avoid them. There was no known shower in this particular area!

He collided violently with a strange ungainly figure. In his desperate haste he did not give much heed, but tried to push his way past. The figure turned on him, and then Grant stopped short, an exclamation frozen to his lips. Red unwinking eyes stared out at him from goggles set in a helmet. The body was completely inclosed in lusterless creatoid. It was a Ganymedan in a space-suit!

Grant saw the quick movement of the other toward an open side flap. He did not hesitate an instant. His fist shot out and caught the Ganymedan flush in the throat, while his left hand simultaneously seized the creatoid-covered arm that gripped a pencil-ray. The helmeted head went back with a sickening thud. But the Ganymedan was a powerful brute. Even as he staggered back from the force of the blow, vainly trying to release the pencil-ray for action, his right foot jerked forward. The next moment both were rolling on the floor, twisting and heaving in silent combat. Frightened passengers rushed down the corridor, screaming with terror, half carried along by the hurricane wind, clambering over the combatants in an insane desire to get away, where, they knew not; and still neither relaxed his grip, seeking a mortal hold.

Pemberton was certain that his silent unknown foe held the clue to the mystery he was trying to fathom. He fought on, silently, grimly. The cold creatoid fabric was slippery, but a sudden jerk of an arm, a certain quick twist that Grant was familiar with, and his enemy went limp. Grant's breath was coming in quick, labored gasps. There was very little air left now. But he did not care. He tugged at the fastenings on the helmet. He must see who his captive was, wrest from him the heart of the mystery.

There came a clatter of feet behind him, a sudden rush of space-suited figures that overwhelmed and passed over him with trampling strides. He was torn loose from his prey, rolled over and over, gasping for air. When he staggered to his feet again, bruised and shaken, the corridor was swept clean of figures. His assailants had carried his opponent away with them.

A wild surge of anger swept through him. More Ganymedans, these rescuers, all accoutered for airless space. They had been carefully prepared for this. Heedless of all else, he swayed groggily after them, intent only on joining battle once again. The illumination was dim now, the cries of

fear that had rung through the ship were gone; only a deathly silence reigned now. His lungs were burning for want of air; even the whirlwind had died down for lack of fuel. But still he kept on, like a bloodhound on the trail.

He rounded a corner. A slight figure, swaying like a reed, collided with him and would have fallen if he had not thrust out a supporting arm. It was a girl. Even in the shadowy light he saw that she was beautiful. Her delicately molded features were drained white, but her deep pooled eyes were level in their gaze, unafraid.

"I'm sorry," he managed, finding utterance labored, "Are you hurt?"

"Quite all right," she said, with a wan smile, "if only I had some air to breathe."

The essential bravery of her touched him. He forgot all about the escaped Ganymedans.

"We'll have to try some other portion of the ship. Maybe some of the bulkheads are uninjured."

She shook her head. "I just saw the captain," she enunciated faintly. "Every bulkhead is riddled. Said—I—should get space-suit—in stateroom—though no use—doomed. Something wrong—wireless—not working...." Her voice trailed. She had fainted.

Grant caught up her slight form and lurched unsteadily into the nearest cabin. The blood was roaring in his ears now, his heart was pumping madly, but he forced himself on. His eyes strained toward the compartment where the emergency space-suit was neatly compacted. Thank God. It was still there. The inmate had evidently rushed out at the first alarm to join the terror-maddened crush.

Pemberton worked with feverish haste. Somehow he thrust the unconscious girl into the suit, tightened the helmet into position, opened the valve that started the steady measured flow of life-giving oxygen. Then, with dark spots dancing before his eyes, he deposited her gently on the floor, and managed to force himself in the now almost total darkness toward another room.

His swelling hands fumbled. The compartment was empty. Despairing, conscious only of a desire to lie down, to rest, he tried another. It, too, was empty. He stumbled over sprawled bodies, fell, managed to get up again. Again he fumbled into a compartment. The clammy feel of the creatoid never was more welcome. His breath was coming in whistling gasps. It seemed ages of strangulation before the first cool rush of oxygen expanded his tortured lungs. For a full minute he stood there, inhaling deep draughts. Then once more he was himself, his brain functioning with keen clarity.

He must find the Ganymedans and come to grips with them. There was no doubt in his mind that somehow they had been responsible for the cataclysm. Just how, he did not know, but he would find out.

But the girl. He could not leave her. Duty and something else stirred into conflict. He hesitated. In the flap of the suit was an emergency flash. Throwing the beam on the walls and flooring, he managed to retrace his steps to the cabin where he had left her. As he flashed it inside, his heart gave a great bound. She was standing now.

"Feel all right?" he spoke into the tiny transmitter that was part of the regulation equipment.

"Fine." Her warm, rich voice spoke in his ear. "But I'm not thinking of myself. Are the others on board safe? What happened?"

"I'm afraid we are the only ones alive," he told her gravely. "As to what happened, I can only guess. We seem to have hit an unusually heavy meteor shower that riddled us through and through, though—" He paused.

"Though what?"

He ignored her question. "The first thing we've got to do is find out where we are." His flash sought the window switch and found it. He went over and pressed it. A section of the beryllium-steel casing slid smoothly open, disclosing a thick flawless quartzite port. He stared out at the dark pattern of space. Long he gazed, then a stifled exclamation reached the girl.

"What is it?" she cried.

"Come and look," he told her gravely, and made room for her.

At first she saw only the unwinking stars of space. Then her eyes shifted forward. Jupiter lay ahead, a vast cloud-girt disk. It was ominously near. Somehow it gave the effect of rushing

straight at her.

Right along the equator floated, or seemed to float, a huge red oval—the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. She had heard of it before. But what caught her immediate attention was a tiny flare of intense illumination, right in the very heart of the Spot. Bright orange it was, tinged with yellow, dazzling even at this distance. She watched it eagerly. Then she gave a sudden start.

"You've seen it." Grant's voice sounded quietly in her helmet.

"Yes. Why, it—it pulsates!"

"Exactly. Now look along the hull of the ship."

She did so, and gasped again. The steel-shod sides were bathed in an unearthly orange glow.

"Why, that must be the light from the orange spot down there."

Grant nodded. "Yes, and more than that. They are power waves of a nature that we've known nothing of before. We are being pulled down along that beam straight for Jupiter, straight for the source of that light!"

"But that means there are intelligent beings on Jupiter."

"No doubt."

"But—but everyone know that there's no life on Jupiter. It's a frozen waste swathed in impenetrable whirlwind clouds."

"How does everyone know?" Grant retorted. "Has anyone ever penetrated through those clouds?"

"No," she admitted; "though there have been plenty of expeditions that tried, and never came back."

"That of course doesn't prove anything. Mind you," he added. "I didn't say there was native life existing on Jupiter. I merely said there were intelligent beings operating that illumination."

"Who could it be then?"

"We'll find out when we get down there."

The very calmness of his matter-of-fact statement brought her back abruptly to their precarious situation.

"But, great heavens, we'll smash and be killed. Can't we do something?"

"We'll not smash." Grant said positively. "Though very likely we shall be killed. As for doing something, we can only wait and take our chances, if the gentry who are hauling us in will only give us an opportunity. You know," he added with a fine inconsecutiveness, "I don't even know your name."

She bubbled with sudden laughter. "Nona—Nona Gail. I was on my way to Callisto, to meet my father," she explained. "He's an engineer, doing some construction work for Interspace Products. But now that I've told you all, what and who may you be?"

He was frank. There was now no need for concealment. "Grant Pemberton, an unimportant unit of the Interplanetary Secret Service."

"Then you knew that the trip would be dangerous," she challenged.

"Yes."

"Why did you come?"

"It is part of my duties."

There was silence between them. He turned to stare out of the quartz port-hole again. Jupiter was perceptibly nearer; an enormous, convex globe that blotted out half the heavens. They were being drawn at a frightful velocity toward the mysterious pulsating point, now blinding in its brilliance.

They both saw it simultaneously: a space-suited figure, far out in the depths of interstellar space, caught up in a sudden flare of orange illumination. The strange figure seemed to whirl around, straighten up, and shoot at breakneck speed headlong for Jupiter. Behind it, and in a direct line with the winking flame in the Great Spot, another space denizen glowed luridly, startlingly, out of the blackness beyond, whirled, and shot down the long invisible path.

Nona cried out: "Grant, tell me quickly, what are they; what is pulling them?"

Even as she spoke, more and more figures were blazoned in that orange ray, until a long file of beings were catapulting in a single straight line past the space-ship, outdistancing it until they became faint specks in the distance.

Pemberton's hand was upon her shoulder, his eyes literally blazing through the goggles, while his voice shouted in her ears. "Come with me: We haven't a second to lose."

"But," she gasped, "you haven't told me—"

"No time," he interrupted, and, shoving her in front of him, he rushed her through corridor after corridor until they came to the air-lock of the liner.

"If only we have time," he groaned, and cursed himself for a bungling fool for not having surmised the maneuver earlier.

Just as he had expected, the great lock was open. The ship was as silent as the grave. There was no air anywhere, only the unutterably cold airlessness of space. Without pausing in his headlong rush, he pushed the bewildered girl through the open port, out into the overwhelming, intangible blackness. Nona's smothered cry of fear came to him as the next instant he stepped forward and left the solid footing to float in sudden weightlessness in a vast sea of nothingness.

The girl reached out and caught his arm convulsively. Even through the fabric of their suits he could feel her trembling. Pemberton had taken good care to retain a hold on the edge of the open air-lock. The two swung unsteadily.

"What is the reason for this?" Grant sensed, rather, than heard, the tremor in her voice. She was making a desperate effort to control herself. "We'll be lost—out here in space."

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "I'll explain in due course. In the meantime you'll have to trust me. Did you see where that invisible ray held when it illumined the last Ganymedan?"

"Ganymedan?" she echoed in surprise. "What makes you think—"

"Never mind that. Did you?" he insisted.

"Yes," she admitted, "it was about over there." She indicated the spot with an outthrust arm. "About a hundred yards, I should judge."

"Exactly," he agreed. "Well, young lady, our lives, and far more, depend upon our reaching that exact line in space immediately."

"I don't know what you are talking about, but even so, how can we make it? I'm not a rocket."

"It's difficult, I admit, but we must. Now hold on tight to my arm, and press your feet firmly against the wall of the ship." She obeyed.

"Now when I count three, shove off violently, and pray that we're going straight. Are you game?"

She stiffened; then, very slowly, "All right; start counting."

"Good girl," Grant said approvingly. "One—two—th-r-ee-ee!"

They flexed their legs in perfect unison. And shoved off.

Out into the blackness of space they shot, lost to all sense of motion: yet the hull of the space-flier, dimly gleaming in the thin light of the far off sun, retreated from them with terrifying swiftness.

They were alone in space! It was an uncanny, a horribly helpless sensation. All about them was infinity, a vast void out of which peered at them the cold, unwinking stars. They were like swimmers in mid-ocean, without even the buoyant feel of the salt water to comfort them.

Nona's grip on Grant's arm was agonizing in its intensity.

"Scared?" Grant queried.

"A—little," she admitted; "but don't bother about me. I'm all right."

She could be depended upon to keep up her end, Grant thought admiringly.

On and on they floated in the welter of space. And still there was no ray, nothing but unrelieved blackness. Pemberton was somewhat worried. Had the saving ray been quenched at the source? Were they too late? If so, they were doomed to a frightful obliterating fall to the surface of the planet, or worse still, they were destined to swing endlessly in space. Already the liner was far away, out of their grasp, even had they desired to return.

His breath was coming in quick gasps now. "Scared?" he once more asked the silent figure beside him.

"Frightfully—but carry on. We'll get there, wherever it is."

Her gay determination strengthened him wonderfully. On and on they floated.

Suddenly the dim, dark bulk of the girl caught the uncanny orange light. The next instant the creatoid fabric of his own suit caught it, too.

"Thank God," he cried joyously. "It's still on. Just relax, Nona, the ray will take care of us now."

He felt a powerful tug at his body, he was whirled completely around, and then there was a steady pull. He was being catapulted down the ray to the mysterious point of brilliance in the Great Red Spot. The girl was right beside him. The space-liner was passed with a smooth rush, and soon receded to a dwindling speck.

"**N**ow will you explain?" asked Nona impatiently, after she had caught her breath in sudden relief.

Grant stretched luxuriously before he began.

"Certainly. There's nothing for us now to do but wait until we get pulled down to Jupiter, and that'll take some time. I hope we look like Ganymedans."

"Will you get on with your story!" she cried.

He obeyed. He started from the beginning and went right up to the time when he had so rudely thrust her out into space.

"You see," he explained. "I had put the puzzle together a bit, but there were still pieces missing. For instance, those chaps down there know that every space-liner is equipped with emergency space-suits. Why pull the ship down with live men on board? That would naturally mean a fight, and we have no mean weapons, what with disintegrator ray-projectors and explosive electro-bullets." Then, again, for some reason, there were Ganymedans on board. They would very likely be whiffed out in the mêlée. The ship might be destroyed also, and they evidently are very careful about getting the ship down intact. The little meteor holes can easily be plugged up, and the liner made as good as new. At least that was my guess.

"I was trying to puzzle it out, rather hopelessly," he continued, "when I saw the ray out in space pick up those floating figures. That was the last little piece in the jigsaw.

"The Ganymedans evidently had to leave the ship because, as it approaches the planet, something will be done to kill off any unfortunates who are still alive, waiting their chance to fight the invisible enemy. Possibly a penetrating lethal gas that will be forced into the interior. So they evolved the ray to carry the Ganymedan passengers down gently, safely. And we are stowaways," he concluded grimly.

Nona had listened intently to the long recital.

"But why," she expostulated, "was it necessary to have their own people on board? The meteors that riddled the ship were projectiles shot from their station on Jupiter. So was the attraction-ray that pulls the ship down."

"Because they required a sufficient force to disable the radio apparatus. All radio waves used on interplanetary liners are shielded from interference. It is impossible to blank them out. And with the radio intact, every battle flier in space would be on their trail in a hurry."

Several hours passed, and still they fell endlessly through space, unaware of their motion except that Jupiter was now a huge orb blotting out the universe. The grim face of the giant planet was enswathed in endless billowing clouds. No one had ever penetrated to the real core. But what held their eager, straining attention was a vast blood red disk, cyclonic in character, directly beneath them. The Great Red Spot! And immediately in the center of it was the tiny, blindingly brilliant yellow orange oval, winking up at them with quick, steady pulsations.

"What can it be?" Nona wondered.

"The source of their power, evidently. But what interests me more just now is where the Ganymedans have their hangout in those clouds, and what they're doing with the ships they capture."

Jupiter was now a flat level stretch that reached on all sides as far as the eye could see. Grant felt a sudden sensation of weight again, as though something was pressing with crushing force against his chest.

"Hello," he said, "our fall is being checked. They're making sure their friends come to no harm." And he laughed bitterly, thinking of the men and women lying with lungs ruptured, cold and stiff, in the interior of the *Althea*; of the possible few wretches who had managed to huddle into space-suits, ignorant of the deadly gas that was soon to search out their seemingly impenetrable habiliments.

Slowly, ever more slowly, they fell. Thin wisps of reddish vapor rushed upward toward them, and

then they were enveloped in vast swirls of cloud masses. They were within the Great Spot!

Then the lurid clouds parted suddenly, revealing a deep hole, at the bottom of which flamed and flared the mysterious yellow-orange brilliance. Down the long shaft they fell, while all around its invisible walls dark red cyclones stirred and beat in vain.

Just as it seemed as if they were doomed to fall headlong into the blaze, they were swerved violently into an opening that angled off from the main shaft. Down this branching shaft they continued to fall—interminably—when suddenly it widened, and they were dropping through the interior of a great dome of which the arched roof was the swirling clouds they had just penetrated. Directly beneath floated a flat island of smooth rock, supported and upheld by a shining sea of vapors.

The girl exclaimed sharply, but Grant only nodded to himself with grim satisfaction. He had expected something like this. For, clustered in serried rows at the end of the island directly beneath them were sleek, stream-lined grayhounds of the interplanetary traffic lanes, now resting immovably on the smooth gray stone—the missing space-liners!

The island was bisected by a huge forbidding wall, over which, at their angle, Grant was unable to see.

The ground was encumbered too with clumps of intricate machinery, all of the same polished gray stone; Ganymedan stone, Ganymedan machinery, Pemberton recognized at once. Hundreds of figures were scurrying awkwardly around, clad in the inevitable space-suit. Several were working desperately at a huge concave glass reflector. Others were pointing a stone nozzle, extending out of a pit, directly upward.

"I'm afraid." Nona shuddered and pressed closer to Grant.

"Don't be," he assured her. "Just say nothing when we land. Let me do the talking."

All this while they had been floating gently downward toward what they now saw to be a miniature replica of the vaster orange brightness at the bottom of the main shaft from which they had been diverted. It was a pool of liquid fire, so intense in its brilliance that their eyes were dazzled staring at it. It rose and fell in regular pulsations. They were not far above it now, and still no one on the strange island seemed to be aware of their coming.

Nona cried out, "Grant, we're going to fall right into it!"

Pemberton looked down at the small fiery pool with anxious eyes. Unless something happened, and that quickly, they would be seared to a crisp. Already the heat was uncomfortable, even through their suits. He tried to kick himself aside, but the pull of the liquid was too powerful for him. Then he resolved on a desperate expedient.

"Say, you fellows down there," he cried in the smooth, slurred Ganymedan speech. "What are you trying to do, fry us? Hurry up and prepare our landing."

For a moment they were tense with the tenseness of imminent death. Were the Ganymedans equipped with communication disks; would they sense the strangeness of the accent? Nona was gripping his hand with a pressure that penetrated the fabric. And every second brought them down closer and closer to the dread lake.

"Ah!" Nona's breath came in a shuddering sigh. For one of the figures glanced upward and saw them dropping. He shouted something to his fellows, and darted for a lever set in the stone next to the pool. He threw it over swiftly. Immediately what seemed to be a smooth slab of transparent glassite shot into position over the pulsating flame, not an instant too soon, either, for it had barely covered the flaming death when the Earthlings' feet were already touching it.

"It would have served you two fools right if I had let you drop in," their savior grumbled disgustedly. "What in Jupiter took you so long? Everyone else arrived hours ago. Didn't know there were any more."

"Sorry, but we couldn't help it," Grant responded carefully. "You see, we got mixed up in a scrap with some Earthmen who evidently suspected us, just as we were diving out of the air-lock. We had the devil's own job of beating them off."

"You too! The Chief came down foaming at the mouth. Some dumb Earthman almost throttled him before he got away. He swears he'll blast Earth out of space. He's that mad. But here, I've got no time to be talking to your fellows. I've got work to do. Better report to the Chief at once, and heaven help you. He's sure in a black rage at this minute."

With that he moved away, over to the gang of Ganymedans holding the stone nozzle and looking expectantly up at the large, round hole in the cloud ceiling.

Nona stood close to Grant. "What are they doing with the queer affair?" She indicated the nozzle. "I'm afraid we'll find out only too soon," he answered grimly. "Look—" he broke off. Far overhead, through the great round orifice, darted a tremendous shape, pointed, glittering. "Why, that's the *Althea*," Nona exclaimed. "Yes. Now watch. Damn—all we can do is watch," Grant gritted between his teeth.

Down sped the gleaming liner, pride of the fleet. The men at the mirror were swerving it on gimbals until a ray from it flashed on the burnished nose. As though it were a physical impact, the vessel slackened its tremendous speed and hung suspended midway between the cloud concavity and the island.

The men with the nozzle spurred into activity. A thin stream of fluid shot out of the orifice straight up for the captive liner. The tip of the expanding spray impinged on the hull—and Nona gasped her astonishment. For the liquid passed clean through the hull as though it were a porous network instead of four-inch thick beryllium-steel.

"Just as I thought," Grant groaned. "Lethal gas that penetrates everything. Those poor people on board—for their own sakes I hope none remained alive to hit this."

"Can't we do anything?" Nona asked desperately.

"Nothing for the *Althea*. But plenty to prevent any more disasters like it." There was a hard ring to his voice. "Come on." He stepped off the transparent slab onto the stone floor of the island.

"Where to?" asked Nona, following.

"We're going to locate that orange oval we saw from the *Althea*. That's the secret of all this. The pool of liquid fire here is unimportant, secondary."

They were at one edge of the floating island. The other side was hidden from them by the solid wall that stretched across its full diameter.

"We'll scout beyond there," Grant pointed out. "I'll miss my guess if what we're looking for is not on the other side."

As they started for the wall, they saw the *Althea* brought slowly down to the rock, another captive to swell the motionless fleet. It did not take them long to reach the barrier. Some fifty feet high it was, of smooth polished Ganymedan stone, and no door or opening in its straight unbroken surface.

"How shall we get through?" Nona asked.

Grant surveyed it thoughtfully.

"There must be a hidden spring somewhere," he said.

He walked carelessly along the wall, tapping it idly here and there. His quick probing fingers were searching.

With a sharp "Ah!" he stopped short. He bent over a moment; his fingers moved deftly. Then he straightened with a grunt of satisfaction. A section of the seemingly solid, immovable stone was sliding silently open. He looked through.

Nona saw him jerk his head back, heard his involuntary cry of horror. Then she heard another cry: an excited warning shout. She whirled around in time to see a Ganymedan running toward them from behind. A deadly pencil-ray pointed straight at her companion. Without a moment's hesitation she sprang at Grant, pushed him violently so that he staggered and fell through the opening to the other side. In so doing, she tripped over his body, and fell prone. That saved her life, for a blue flame sheared clean through the stone, inches above her head.

Grant squirmed around underneath. The electro-gun was somehow out of the side flap and now it spat its explosive hail. The tiny bullets flared into little puff balls of flame against the space-suit of the Ganymedan. A long howl of anguish came to them as he threw up his hands and fell into a shapeless heap. But a moment later there were other cries, angry shouts. Pemberton was on his feet again with the quickness of a cat. He pulled Nona up after him, thrust her to one side, behind the protection of the wall. His eyes were blazing now, aflame with the ardor of battle. Very carefully he leaned out and pressed the trigger. The surging mob was caught in full flight. The electro-bullets spread fanwise, exploded into flaming deaths. The Ganymedans went down as though a huge scythe had swept through their ranks. The survivors scattered hastily, throwing themselves headlong to the surface of the rock to escape further execution.

"That'll hold them for a while," Grant laughed grimly.

"Drop your gun, and turn around—both of you." A cold, smooth voice spoke in deadly menace directly behind them—a voice that came from the mysterious inner side of the wall.

Grant spun around, his gun ready to fire. A ray snapped out at him, a ray with a greenish tinge. The fingers of his gun hand grew suddenly nerveless; the weapon dropped unresistingly from his paralyzed hand.

A tall Ganymedan towered before him, unhidden by a space-suit. Evidently there was a layer of air in here. The red lidless eyes were filled with a cold fury. Spatulate fingers tensed on the button of a pencil ray.

"Miro," Grant breathed to himself unbelievably. A great light burst upon him.

The Inspector of the Service for Ganymede did not recognize him, swathed as Grant was in the depths of his space-suit, nor did he notice the little movement of surprise. He was too furiously angry. His words came tumbling out in a tremble of rage.

"You damned scoundrels; have you gone mad? What do you mean by coming in here through the secret way? Don't you know it is death for anyone to pass the barrier? And what do you mean by shooting down your fellows with an Earth weapon? Answer, damn you, before I thrust you into the Gorm."

Both were silent; Nona because she did not know what to say, and Grant because he knew his voice would be recognized by Miro's keen ears. He kept his eyes fixed on the Ganymedan, waiting hawk-like for one false move, for the tiniest wavering of attention. But the pencil-ray was pointed squarely at his breast.

"You won't talk?" Miro's voice was choked with passion. "Well, there are ways to make you." With one foot he kicked at the open slab, while his weapon commanded them unwaveringly. There was a smooth soundless rush. Grant knew that the wall was an unbroken surface again. They were cut off on the secret side of the island, alone with Miro.

Yet that was the horror of it. They were not alone. For Grant's first darting look inside when he had first opened the panel had shown him the others. Hundreds of them there were, men of all races and planets, a motley crew. And each man walked stiffly, unnaturally, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Their eyes were fixed and glassy; the skin of their faces, no matter what their origin, was uniformly parched and gray. A cold sweat broke out on Grant's forehead. They looked like automatons: beings from whom life had been drained. He heard a little choked cry from Nona; she had seen them, too.

Miro plucked out with his free hand a little pear-shaped mechanism punctured with innumerable holes. He blew into it, once—twice. It gave forth a high whining note. Instantly two of the strange lifeless men wheeled angularly, and with queer mechanical movements headed straight for them. A bloodless hand stretched out, grasped Nona. Grant heard her scream and saw her struggling in a loathsome grip.

Forgetting everything, forgetting the deadly ray in Miro's hands, he sprang to her rescue. The next instant he was in the grip of a similar hand, a frail, dead-white naked arm, yet endowed with the strength of steel. Struggle as he might, dash his fist as hard as he could against the unresisting blank face, he could not loose that grip. Miro watched his futile strugglings mockingly.

"Take these traitors over to the Gorm and let me look at their faces," he ordered.

Grant and Nona were picked up in those emaciated, powerful arms as easily as though they were children, and the unhuman creatures proceeded at a slow, awkward pace away from the hall, toward the outer edge of the island. From his uncomfortable vantage point, Pemberton noticed that they were passing clumps of intricate stone machinery. Dead-faced automatons, similar to their captors, were tending the whirring machinery with ordered, stiff-legged movements.

Then, straight ahead, Grant saw the edge of the island, against which beat and billowed in furious, gigantic heaves, the reddish overarching clouds of the Great Spot. Strangely enough, though they whirled and eddied, they could not seem to break through the invisible barrier. And then the lake of fire sprang into view—the mysterious place of flame they had seen from afar, that had pulled the hapless *Althea* out of its course down to destruction on Jupiter. This then was the Gorm!

A wide circular pool it was, of an unearthly yellow-orange brilliance. The midday sun was no more dazzling to the eye. Out it stretched from the island into the vapors of the Great Red Spot, only touching the stone rim of the island at one thin point. Its liquid fires were waveless now, oily, yet there was something horrible, too, about its smooth quiescence.

Miro whistled. The rigid guards dropped their burdens roughly and stood at attention. One was

an Earthman, the other a fish-faced Venusian. Yet the queer dead look of their eyes was exactly the same.

"Will you remove your helmets, or shall I ask the Doora to assist you?" Miro's voice was silky.

Because there was nothing else to do, Grant unscrewed his helmet and let it fall back on its hinge. Then he looked very calmly and steadily at the Inspector of the Service for Ganymede.

A dull flame leaped into Miro's eyes at the sight of his captive.

"You!" Then he smiled, a peculiarly horrible smile. "You are cleverer than I thought, my Earth friend. You should have been strangled to death on the *Althea*, or made into one of—"

He stopped short, and the smile widened cruelly. "But it is not too late. No, it is not too late."

Grant disregarded his cryptic phrases. He smiled, too, a contemptuous smile that cut like a lash.

"You, Miro, an Inspector of the Service, are only a lying, treacherous, butchering Ganymedan. Filthy scum of the Universe."

Miro started forward with a roar, a dark flush of rage suffusing his green-tinged countenance. His blunt-edged finger trembled on the button of the pencil-ray. Grant knew he was perilously on the verge of sudden death, yet his scornful glance did not waver.

It was Nona, hitherto unnoticed, her helmet removed, who darted upon the giant Ganymedan with small beating fists. Miro saw her coming and swung her sprawling away with one sweep of his free hand, while he covered Grant with the other.

He had recovered his composure. Some secret merriment seemed to convulse him.

"Ho! ho!" he shouted. "Who is this little spitfire? By Jupiter, she is a tempting morsel." And his red eyes took in the flushed beauty of the panting girl speculatively.

Grant tensed for a quick spring.

"Stand where you are," Miro barked. "One move and it will be your last." Gone was the smooth unctuous speech of former times. His tone now was cutting, deadly.

"You damned Earthmen have been crowing long enough," he said. "When Miro and Ganymede get through with you, the very memory of your filthy planet will have been erased from the solar system." His voice rose higher. "You thought you had us beaten down with your space-battleships and your embargoes on metals. And we were meekly repentant. Oh yes, we were! We took you in nicely. Why, they even made me, Miro, Inspector of your rotten Service.

"But we have been preparing against the day for years. Here on this island that we built we worked, hidden from interference. We are ready now. Our fleets will sail out, in your own ships, to smash the combined space navies of the solar system."

In spite of himself Grant could not hide a sudden grin of relief. The man was mad, to think of pitting a few liners against armored battle craft. Miro saw that grin.

"You think I'm mad, don't you?" he gloated. "Just listen to this, then. We have found a substance that no ray, no electro-bullet can penetrate. Every ship will be coated with it. And the Gorm here"—he pointed to the oily lake—"will draw your proud cruisers down to destruction, or thrust them far out into the uncharted spaces, helpless, just as it pleases us. You wonder how it works? Look! Now it attracts, and powerfully. But when I reverse the current passing through it like this"—he leaned over and pulled a switch set in the rock right by the edge—"it repels everything. We'll just stand off in space and pick off your proud warships one by one, without a scratch to ourselves. See?" He fairly hissed the last word.

Grant saw, and the cold sweat burst out on his forehead. His brain raced desperately in a vain effort to find some way out, some method of foiling this beast.

"You sure talk big, Miro," he said in bored fashion, feigning indifference; "but it means nothing to me. The point is, what do you intend doing with us?"

The Ganymedan's lips writhed. "Nothing at all to your pretty friend," he leered. "I have plans for her. But as for you—see these creatures all about?"

"Well?"

"You are going to be one of them. They are passengers and crews who had the misfortune to be alive when the captured ships were sprayed with our gas. It does not kill. Oh, no! It just numbs

their faculties, paralyzes them. Then our surgeons get busy. They know how to remove the memory and reasoning areas of the brain and leave just machines, automata, to do our bidding. Clever, aren't they? When Earth is captured, I intend subjecting all your damned breed to the operation. They make very willing slaves, I've found. Two blasts on this toy"—he raised the whistle to his lips—"and an Earth-Doora comes for you."

Nona sprang forward. "No, no, Miro. Please do not touch Mr. Pemberton. I'll—I'll—"

"What will you?" The Ganymedan's pig-eyes devoured her.

"I'll—" Then, to Grant's eternal horror, she sank into Miro's arms. The surprised look on Miro's face changed slowly to one of passion, as he held her close to him with his great hairy arm.

"Nona!" Grant gasped and saw red. Heedless of the unwavering weapon at his breast, he sprang. Miro snarled as he saw him coming. His finger pressed down. But at that instant the Earth girl struck out with all the power of her slender arm. It was not much of a blow, but it managed to jar the weapon aside. The blue flame leaped hissing through the air.

Miro roared with rage, and flung her yards away, to lie, an unmoving pathetic bundle. Then he swung his ray back into play.

But he never had a chance to use it. All the strength and fury of Grant's lithe, steel sinews and bone were behind the solid smash that landed squarely on the Ganymedan's chin. He went down in a slump, completely out.

Grant stooped to pick up the fallen pencil-ray, thrust it in the side flap, then hurried over to the limp figure of Nona.

"Darling," he cried, "if anything's happened to you, I'll—"

The still form stirred, sat up.

"Say that again." She was smiling weakly, but happily.

Grant flushed. "As many times later as you'll want," he said, "but now that you're not hurt, we can't waste any time in trying to get out of here."

He walked over to Miro, who was just coming to.

"Listen, you rat," he told the Ganymedan, who was rubbing his chin and groaning: "you do exactly as I say, if you know what's good for you." He shook the pencil-ray significantly.

"You can't get away with it," Miro snarled, muttering a string of curses. There was baffled rage in his red pig-eyes.

Grant surveyed him coldly.

"We'll see about that," he snapped. "Get up." He reinforced his demand with a well-placed kick. The huge Ganymedan came quickly to his feet.

"Walk to the wall," was the next order, "and open the trick door."

With a glance of savage hate, Miro obeyed. Grant followed him with his pistol in readiness. The poor mindless creatures paid no heed to what was going on, but dully continued their appointed tasks.

Pemberton hid himself behind the wall to one side. Nona did likewise, having picked up the electro-gun meanwhile. Only Miro stood before the opening.

"Now tell your cutthroat friends out there we want one of the liners brought directly over the Gorm, you understand. Not the Althea, though—that's still full of holes. And only one Ganymedan to guide her over the wall. Be very explicit, and not a false move out of you, or it'll be your last."

With the knowledge that two deadly weapons were pointing squarely at him, Miro shouted unwillingly the necessary instructions to his subordinates outside. Then Grant leaned over and kicked the slide shut.

There followed tense moments of waiting. Would the workers beyond obey their leader? Had they become suspicious, and were even now massing for a surprise attack? Grant had no means of telling.

Then to his ears came the most welcome soft roar of muted rockets. A huge shape swept over the high wall, soared directly over the Gorm, and nestled down in little jets of flame until the stern rested on the solid rock, and the bow swung idly over the brilliant pool.

"Keep your gun trained on this bird," Grant told Nona swiftly. She nodded. The air-lock door on the ship was already sliding open. A Ganymedan, space-suited, was coming through. He saw

them, tried to spring back into the shelter of the ship. But a blue ray stabbed out and caught him in mid-flight. There was a spatter of dust, and the hapless creature disintegrated into thin air.

"Sorry I had to do it, but I couldn't afford to let him give the alarm. Now for the dirty work, Nona. You hustle this big bully into the ship, and keep him covered. I'll be right along."

The girl cast him a look of anxiety. "What do you intend doing?"

"Don't worry," he assured her; "I won't get hurt."

After he had seen them within the liner, he got to work. First he brought out from the ship coils of wiring and jumbles of instruments. He took them over to the edge of the Gorm, to the place where he had seen Miro pull the switch, and for the next ten minutes was busy connecting wires, attaching batteries, putting his instruments in place. Then, when he was satisfied that everything was ready, he reversed the switch. The great space-ship, some fifty feet away, was already trembling in every line.

Just as he was rising to sprint for the slowly moving liner, he heard a smooth rushing noise. He whirled. The slide was opening in the wall. A mob of Ganymedans were pouring through. They paused uncertainly a moment, then, as they spied him, there was a concerted rush forward.

Grant acted quickly. Already the space-ship was off the ground, soaring upward. He had not an instant to spare. He dove toward it. The mob yelled, and raced forward to cut him off. His pencil-ray was useless—the distance was too great for its limited range. But then, that applied equally to the weapons of the Ganymedans.

The blue rays snapped forward at him angrily, but fell short. The ship was moving faster now. It was already several feet off the ground. Grant's heavy space-suit impeded his progress. The charging Ganymedans were dangerously close now. That last beam had missed him by inches. The ship was gathering speed. He was five feet away from the open air-lock when they got the range. A sharp searing pain right across his shoulder. The creatoid material of his suit was cut away as with a knife. A layer of flesh lay exposed. The skin had been whiffed into nothingness.

But that very instant he was leaping off the ground with a mighty effort. The ship was going upward with a rush now. His fingers clawed desperately at the edge of the air-lock. For one breathless instant he clung; then, to his horror, the smooth creatoid covering refused to hold. Slowly he slipped, in spite of every effort, as the surface of the hull refused purchase to his bleeding hands, then down he went with a thud.

A cry of triumph arose from the onrushing Ganymedans as Grant scrambled to his feet, bruised and shaken. He cast a swift, despairing glance upward. The huge liner was a hundred feet up now, gathering speed swiftly. To one side was the Gorm, a place of dread and menace. The gloating enemy were almost upon him. Even the comfort of a weapon, the grim satisfaction of taking some of his foes to death with him, was denied him.

The pencil-ray had been jarred out of his hand by the impact and had doubtless fallen into the Gorm.

Grant felt that he had come to the end of the rope. There was no tremor of fear in him, only regret that he had met the girl and lost her so soon. What would she do, out in space, alone with Miro? No time to think of that now, though. The foremost of the Ganymedans were almost upon him. They intended taking him alive, did they? He braced himself for the attack, ready to go down fighting.

Then a brilliant plan beat suddenly upon his dazzled mind. It was breath-taking, so simple, yet so desperate did it appear. If it worked—he would win through. If not—but Grant dismissed that thought quickly; one form of death was no worse than another.

Without an instant's hesitation, he whirled and jumped as high as he could—directly over the Gorm! There was a yell of astonishment from the Ganymedans—one had already clutched at his intended victim—as they fell back in horror from the edge. This Earthling was mad to brave the terrors of the Gorm!

But Grant heard nothing. He was instantly conscious of a searing, racking pain that penetrated his every fiber. He forced his eyes upward, anywhere but beneath him. Was his theory correct, or was he destined to drop into the fiery lake. For a single interminable instant, he suffered untold agonies.

Then his body quivered, and he felt an unmistakable push against him. He was moving upward, just as he had hoped. The Gorm was repelling him, even as it had the ship.

Faster and faster he shot up, chasing the liner. Would he catch up with it? He strained his eyes. Exultation flooded through him as he realized that the distance was rapidly lessening between them. The added impetus of his leap over the Gorm had given him the required extra fillip of

speed. By now, rays were streaking by him.

Soon he was directly underneath. For an instant he had a quick fear that he might overshoot his mark. But no—he was sliding past the open air-lock. He threw himself sideways and caught at it. This time his fingers held.

As he squirmed and wriggled into the lock, they were already careening into the orange tube through the red swirling clouds. There was no longer any air. Choking, he managed with numbed fingers to screw his helmet on. Then, closing the lock, he proceeded into the ship.

Nona was guarding her prisoner vigilantly. Miro sat there, sullen, defiant. Her glad, welcoming cry filled Grant with a new strange warmth.

"I was so afraid for you when the ship started and you didn't show up," she said, "but I didn't dare leave him alone." She indicated Miro.

"Good girl," he said admiringly. "We'll bind him now and then I want to show you something."

They stood a little later at the bow quartz port-hole. Down the long shaft through which they had risen they saw the glaring flame of the Gorm. As they looked, its regular pulsations turned irregular: it leaped and splashed as though it was a stormy, choppy sea. Then it gave one final mighty heave, and the universe seemed to shatter beneath them. The "walls" of the shaft collapsed about them and they were enswathed in a raging storm of red clouds.

Nona turned to Grant. "Now, will you explain?"

"Certainly," he grinned boyishly. "I simply reversed the switch that changes the current of the Gorm. I knew that it would then repel the liner out into space, as Miro was incautious enough to inform me.

"Then I figured that if instead of direct current, an alternating flow could be induced, so as to attract and repel in quick succession, enough of a disturbance would be raised in that highly unstable mixture to start fireworks. So I rigged up an automatic break in the circuit, timed it to permit us to get up enough speed from the repulsion to be safely on our way before it would start. The circuit-breaker worked and the alternating current did the rest. That island is wiped out, and so is the Gorm. There'll be no further threat of danger to the solar system from that."

"And Miro, what are we going to do with him?"

"Turn him over to the Service. They'll take care of him. And now, young lady, if you have no further questions, shall I say it again?"

She smiled up at him tenderly, answering:

"If you wish."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PIRATES OF THE GORM ***

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