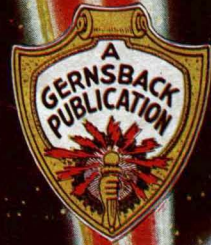


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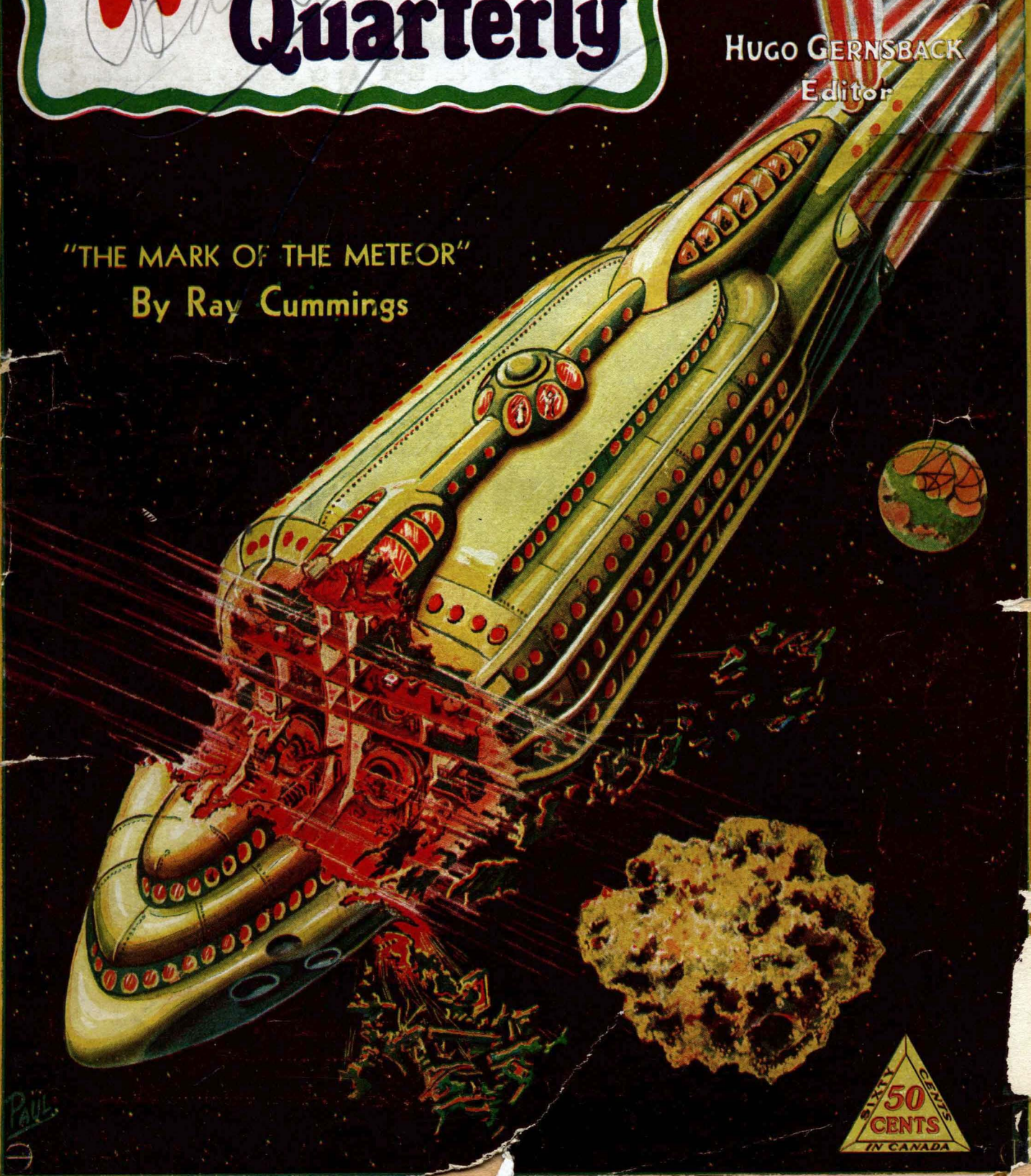
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Quarterly

WINTER
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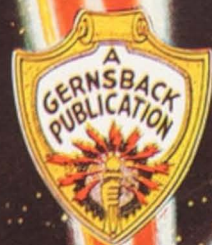


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WONDER Stories Quarterly

PUBLICATION OFFICE:
404 North Wesley Ave., Mt. Morris, Ill.

Published by

STELLAR PUBLISHING CORPORATION

H. GERNSBACK, *Pres.*

I. S. MANHEIMER, *Sec'y* S. GERNSBACK, *Treas.*

**Vol. 2
No. 2**

**WINTER
1931**

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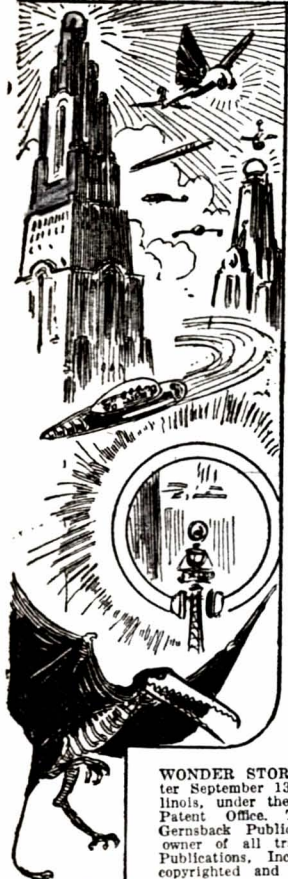
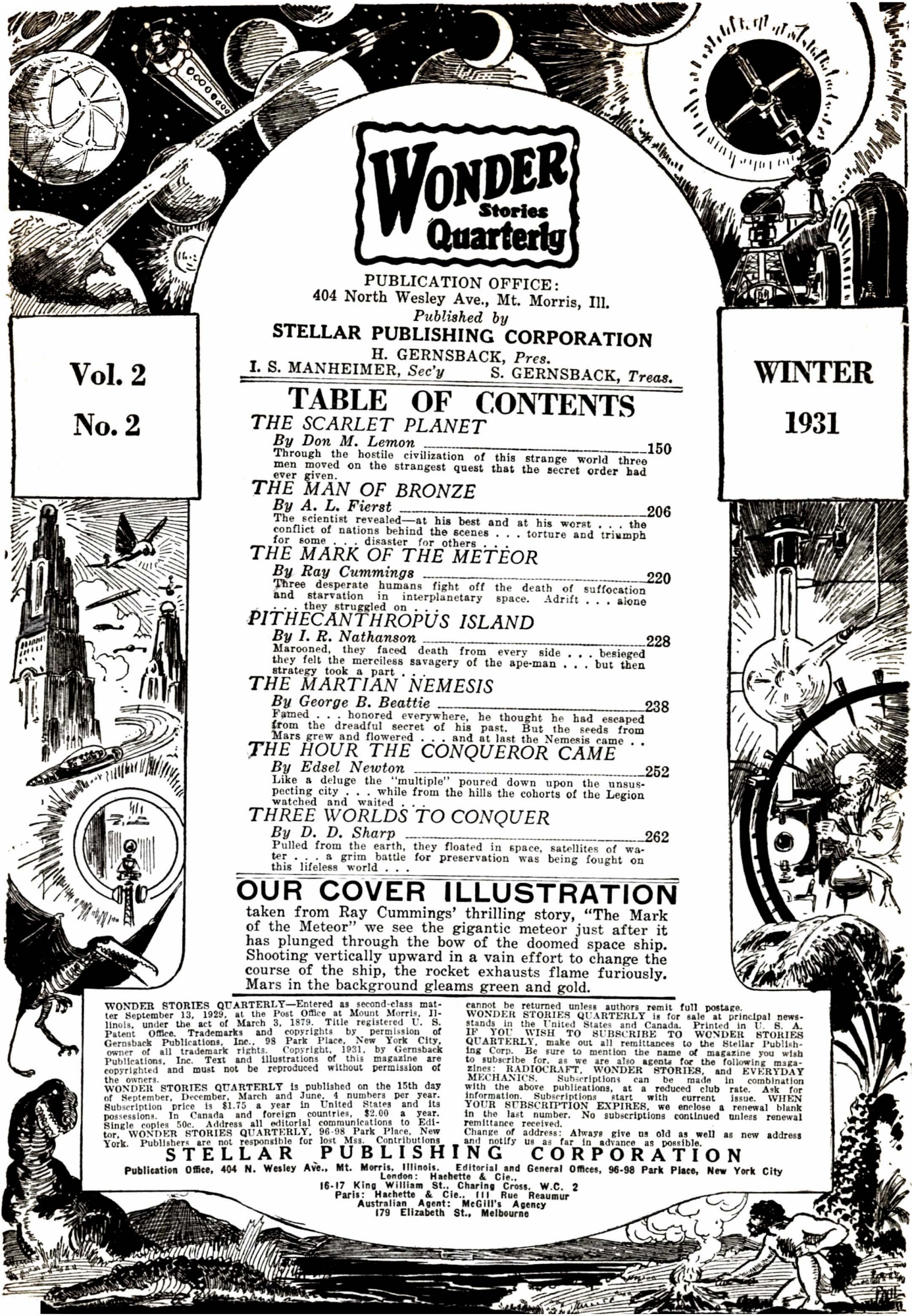
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WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY is published on the 15th day of September, December, March and June, 4 numbers per year. Subscription price is \$1.75 a year in United States and its possessions, in Canada and foreign countries, \$2.00 a year. Single copies 50c. Address all editorial communications to Editor, WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY, 96-98 Park Place, New York. Publishers are not responsible for lost Mss. Contributions

cannot be returned unless authors remit full postage. WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY is for sale at principal newsstands in the United States and Canada. Printed in U. S. A. IF YOU WISH TO SUBSCRIBE TO WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY, make out all remittances to the Stellar Publishing Corp. Be sure to mention the name of magazine you wish to subscribe for, as we are also agents for the following magazines: RADIOCRAFT, WONDER STORIES, and EVERYDAY MECHANICS. Subscriptions can be made in combination with the above publications, at a reduced club rate. Ask for information. Subscriptions start with current issue. WHEN YOUR SUBSCRIPTION EXPIRES, we enclose a renewal blank in the last number. No subscriptions continued unless renewal remittance received. Change of address: Always give us old as well as new address and notify us as far in advance as possible.

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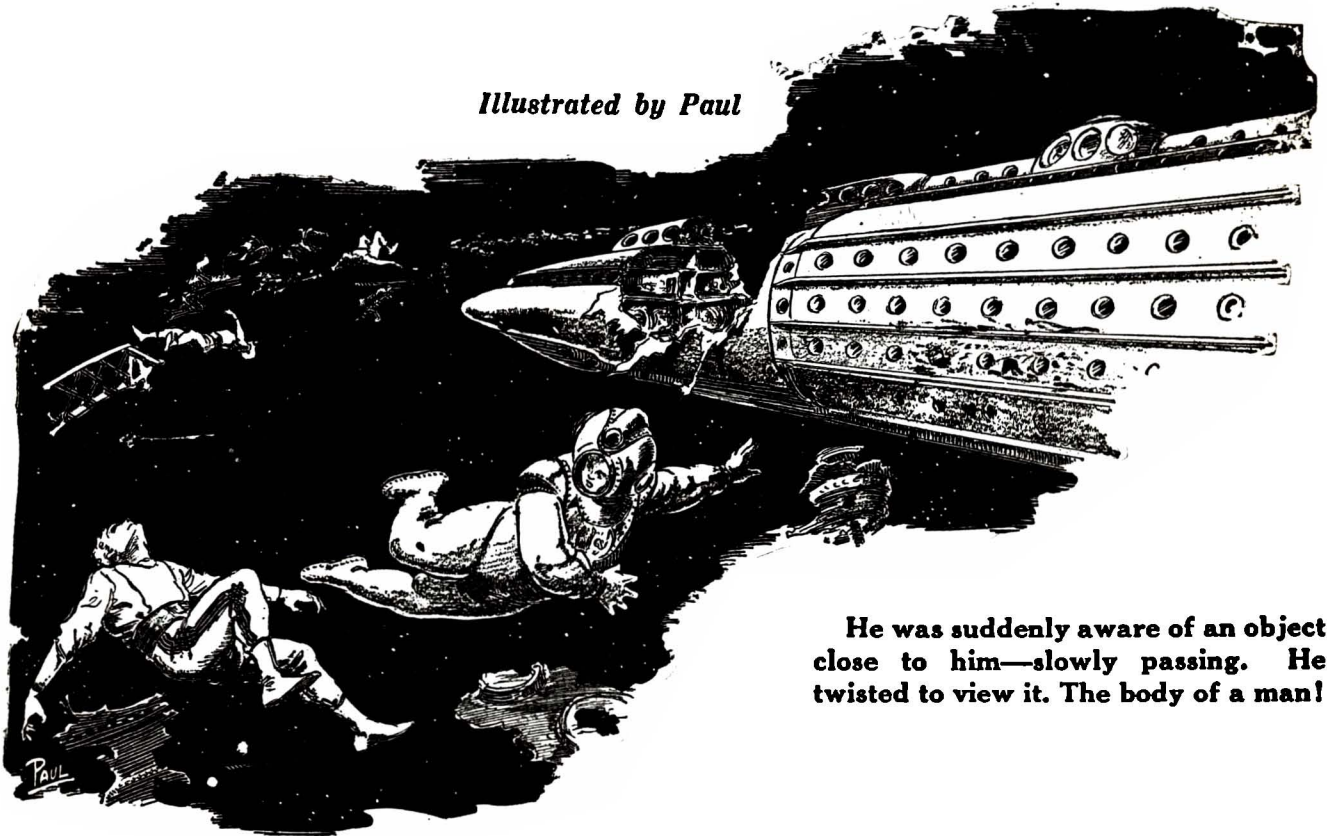
Publication Office, 404 N. Wesley Ave., Mt. Morris, Illinois. Editorial and General Offices, 96-98 Park Place, New York City
16-17 King William St., Charing Cross, W.C. 2
Paris: Hachette & Cie., 111 Rue Reaumur
Australian Agent: McGill's Agency
179 Elizabeth St., Melbourne



The Mark of the Meteor

By Ray Cummings

Illustrated by Paul



He was suddenly aware of an object close to him—slowly passing. He twisted to view it. The body of a man!

Three human beings isolated in the immensities of space — death from starvation and suffocation nears. Who will weaken first!

THE central glassite dome of the *Comet* was rolled back. From where he stood, amidst in the peak of the vessel's superstructure, Graham could see down past the main cabin roof to the narrow side-deck where the passengers were coming up the incline from the landing stage. Beneath and beyond the stage lay the lights of the great Martian city, the oval roofs and spires and minarets of its buildings interspersed with the giant mushroom growth of its trees. And beyond the city the great canal-like gash, filled now with the evening water-tide which placidly mirrored the stars—a silver gash like a sword slash across the rolling countryside.

The moment of departure was at hand. Graham Trent was radio-helio operator of the *Comet*, and at the moment he had no duties to occupy him. The *Comet's* twenty or thirty passengers seemed all on board; the stage was lined with waving friends. The *Comet* resounded with bells, moving signal lights; the hum of the dynamos beginning their first low throb. They would be away presently, inward bound on the return voyage to the Earth.

Graham's attention was suddenly drawn to a last arriving passenger. A woman shrouded in the white street robe of a Shahn virgin. She came hastily up the incline, a steward preceding with her handbags. Though Graham leaned forward curiously, he did not realize that his destiny was at a cross-roads. It was too small a figure for a Martian girl. As she reached the deck a hooded tube-light fell by chance upon her face. An Earthgirl. A face framed by dark curls. Even at that distance it seemed to Graham that her face was one of rare and extraordinary beauty.

She had followed the steward toward her cabin and was lost to Graham's view when yet another belated passenger arrived. A Martian man. He was some six feet in height—rather undersized for a Martian. A man of perhaps forty. Sleek, grey-green skin—a native of the Ferrok province. He seemed an important personage. The stage-master deferentially ushered him and his luggage aboard.

Graham watched him idly. A Martian gentleman, perhaps a man of wealth. A sleek and

dapper fellow garbed now in Earthly evening clothes in the fashion one might see in any notable gathering of Great New York. Yet to Graham, the men of Mars were always strange—sinister figures.

This late arrival was bareheaded. From the peak of his forehead, his smooth black hair, shot with wide white strands, went sleekly back to suggest the mane of an animal. It fell long to the base of his neck at the back and at the sides it was brushed neatly above his round gray-green ears— He was lost in the group of passengers on the deck.

With the glassite dome closed the *Comet* was presently ascending the Martian atmosphere. The vessel was throbbing, humming, whining with the low mingled sounds of its many mechanisms. The pressure air sang as it oscillated in the double shell of the hull; the electric rocket-streams for this atmospheric passage hissed as they surged out like a tail beneath the uptilted ship; the pressure pumps throbbed rhythmically filling the tanks in preparation for the shifting of the gravity plates—it was all a steady blended hum of sound.

II.

Romance!

BUT I think you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," Graham said earnestly. It was two days later, with Mars rapidly merging into the immeasurable skies.

She laughed softly. "That's nice of you."

It occurred to Graham that the compliment sounded very naive. He had not meant it so; it had burst from him. Here on the narrow deck of the *Comet*, with the Sun on the other side of him, there was only the soft blended starlight on Alma's face as she sat in the deck chair beside him. An effulgence of Heavenly beauty.

"But I mean," he laughed. "Don't think me a silly fellow. I'm not—at least I hope I'm not. It's easy enough to pay extravagant compliments—"

"Oh," she said demurely, "I hadn't realized it was so extravagant."

He flushed. "I didn't mean that. You know I didn't. Look here, I'm trying to say just the opposite. You're beautiful. More beautiful than any girl of Earth, or Mars—and I'm telling you so, though I hardly know you."

It was the third or fourth time they had talked together. She had told him nothing of herself.

Her name was Alma Rance, Graham had soon learned. The Martian man who had come aboard just after her was called Set Kol. Was there anything between them? So far though Graham had not seen Alma speak to Kol since the voyage began, he was convinced that they knew each other. He had remarked the Martian's tall sinister figure promenading the deck. It seemed that frequently the man flung covert, leering glances at this girl. He had seen a shade of fright cross her face at his approach. What mystery could there be between the two? Had she come aboard that night, trying to escape from him out of Ferrok-Shahn? Was he following her now back to Earth? Graham thought so.

"I hardly know you," Graham repeated. "I want to know you—really I do."

He felt suddenly swept by emotion. The dim deck around them seemed remote. There was only the starlight—the black vault of the Heavens, strewn with blazing gems, and red Mars a dwindling but still gigantic disc. It seemed to Graham that here in space, detached from

all worlds, this girl and he were alone together; their spirits clinging; it seemed as though after ages of emptiness, they had found one another.

And to her must have come something similar. Her small white hand moved over and touched his. Her fingers held his fingers. And between them something flowed. A current. Imponderable. Intangible. Something which marked unmistakably to them both the chemistry of love.



RAY CUMMINGS

IF we grant that interplanetary travel will one day come and people will travel as blithely to Mars or Venus as we do now across our oceans, we can realize that the adventures encountered in such journey will be one of the most extraordinary kind. A wreck on an ocean liner for example means merely the taking to life boats, or the awaiting of rescue but a few hours away. But in empty space tens of millions of miles from the nearest world and possibly millions from any other ship, an interplanetary wreck would be replete with occurrences of the most amazing nature.

But man is always man—no matter if he is in a large city or adrift in interplanetary space. He will carry with him his old fears and prejudices and lusts. And if as might easily happen, three people are obliged to fight out their existence adrift in the emptiness of the heavens, he may easily give way in a violent fashion to these lusts—and provide as he does in this case by the master hand of Ray Cummings, the material for the most dramatic of stories!

"But I say—" Graham stammered.

He saw the starlight mirrored in her eyes. Wan, misty starlight.

He stammered, "But I say—"

A step sounded. A passenger wandered past and stood at one of the window-portes nearby, gazing at the glories of the firmament. His profile half seen in the star-light resembled the Martian's, and that sardonic smile, the smile of a man content to wait— Alma said awkwardly,

"I—really I must be going below. It's very late."

He stood beside her. "Good night—"

"Good night," she said, and left him.

III.

The Juggernaut!

"**Q**UITE a sight, isn't it?" said Graham. "This way, Alma."

She followed him along the metal catwalk. The central domepeak spread over them. The black firmament was a glory of blazing worlds through the overhead windows. The *Comet* was five days out from Mars. The planet hung like a great reddish full-moon behind the ship's stern. The round disk of Sun was ahead—a fiery ball in the blackness blazing with prismatic colors, its gigantic streamers of flame mounting to make the brilliant corona.

The network of ladders and bridges up here in the ship's mid-dome section was illumined by mingled starlight and sunlight. The top of the cabin superstructure spread some twenty feet beneath Graham and Alma. It was like being in the rigging of an ancient surface ship.

"Only my room and the Captain's quarters up here," Graham was saying. They passed a transverse glassite bulkhead; Graham slid an airport door and they went through the opening.

"You're sure it is all right for me to come?" the girl asked.

"Of course," he laughed. "I have Captain Blake's permission. He's down on the forward bridge now. No one up here. I'll show you his chart room—then my helio-room."

By the ship time it was early evening * of the fifth night out from Mars. The strains of music wafted up from the forward lounge. The passengers were in a gay mood. And Graham too was very happy. The flush on Alma's cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes as she clung to him on the narrow walk and gazed so interestedly. . . .

"These are the Captain's rooms," he said. He showed her the two small connecting rooms—metal cubbies perched here like birds' nests. A chart room, and the Captain's bedroom. They glanced in.

On a table by the Captain's bed stood a glass of milk and a small plate of sandwiches—his accustomed meal before he retired—which a few moments before a steward had placed there. And a carafe of drinking water was in a rack over the bed.

"And my cubby is along the bridge—this way."

Twenty feet further, on the opposite side of the catwalk hung Graham's helio cubby. It was a metal box-like room some ten feet square by six feet high. Graham's bunk was in a bulge of one of its walls, with a portière draped before it.

"So this is where you work, Graham?"

"Yes," he said. "Sit down, Alma. I've a message to send. I'll show you."

The room was dim with starlight from its single square side window. The radio sending equipment and the rotary helio-mirrors, prisms and light portes were ranged on an instrument table. There was another small table, with messages on files; and two small chairs.

Alma sat down, gazing out of the window. Its glassite pane was merged here with the dome. There were two doors to the room, both of which had transparent glassite panes. One gave directly onto a pressure chamber and then to open space—an exit porte for use only to ventilate the room when the ship was in the atmosphere or an emergency exit into space. The other door, on the opposite side, was the one by which Graham and Alma had just entered from the catwalk. They left it open; the room was fairly hot.

"Like my quarters?" said Graham. "You do get a marvelous view. Don't you think so? And it seems different—you're more detached somehow. Don't you feel it?"

An awkwardness was upon him. Having Alma alone up here— He found himself trembling. He drew up his chair beside her.

"Alma, I didn't bring you to watch me send a message. I—there's something I want to say to you. I wanted to say it up here—really alone with you. Up here alone—with the stars around us."

His hand touched hers; he could feel her trembling, emotion-swept like himself.

"Graham—"

As though it were fate always snatching them apart, a vague moving shadow fell upon the starlit table before them.

"Graham, look!"

A shadow from the catwalk doorway. Graham leaped up. At the door he was just in time to see a man's figure disappearing past the Captain's cabin.

"What is it, Graham?"

"That damned Martian—that Kol—eavesdropping on us! Sit quiet, Alma! By Heaven—"

He got no further. Beyond the network of bridges the firmament was visible through the ship's bow dome-peak. Graham caught a glimpse of a huge black shape out there; a great whirling rock dashing through space. The sunlight and starlight edged it, as in the blackness it suddenly became visible—forbidding—menacing— It had been a thousand miles away a minute before; but now like a juggernaut it leaped toward them. A derelict asteroid! There would be a collision!

Graham turned. "Alma—" He was aware that he had clutched her. He heard the doomed *Comet's* interior resounding with bells; the danger siren starting its shriek. An instant of chaos. The ship lurched upward, its rocket exhausts working furiously! Too late! A blinding flash

*Early evening according to the ship's reckoning.

of light enveloping everything. A smashing tearing impact. The universe quivering, staggering.

Graham's senses slid into an abyss of soundless blackness—

IV.

A Dead World!

WITH returning consciousness Graham found himself not greatly hurt; he had been flung to the floor of his cubby. Alma was there. Dead? No, she moved; she opened her eyes.

"Graham—"

He knelt over her; raised her head. In a moment she was recovered.

"What happened, Graham? What was it?"

In the blur of those next minutes Graham moved about his room. Then he roved the spider bridges; went down one of the dangling ladders a distance. What had happened was all to obvious.

Beneath his cubby the *Comet* lay wrecked and broken. From the ladder he stared down at it. The forward dome-peak was bashed in. Everything movable on the ship had been hurled into a strewn litter. The side decks, as they showed from where Graham stood, were piled at the forward ends with hurled deck chairs. And bodies were there. Lying motionless—stiffened in death—

The emergency glassite bulkheads were closed. Graham drew a deep breath; he was shuddering. There was air here in this upper dome section. The automatic bulkhead slides had closed and were holding it. But, save for this upper network of ladders and bridges, Graham's cubby and the nearby Captain's rooms, the ship was devoid of air! A dead ship. It lay now, silent—gruesome—

Graham stood listening to it. None of the mechanisms were operating. A derelict in space, the doomed *Comet* hung poised. A little broken world, floating in the grip of all the myriad balanced forces of the universe.

The ship's interior air-pressure had been maintained at some fifteen or sixteen pounds to the square inch. The bow dome had cracked. In a moment from every corner of the vessel, the air had rushed out into the vacuum of space—the cold had rushed in to fill everything. The bodies down there on the deck not mangled; suffocated, lying there stricken when the air left them—frozen into horrible positions—

And Graham knew that all over the ship it was the same. In every public room, in the state-rooms, the mechanism rooms—death everywhere. With life only up here in the center dome. Of all the ship's passengers and crew, only he and Alma remained alive.

He went back and told her. And she stared at him. The last thing which had been in both their thoughts was a great desire to be alone together. Now, by strange fate, they were alone. The only inhabitants of this broken little world, drifting in the immensity of space.

Graham made his calculations. The air renew-

ers were not operating. But the air here would last them for a week or more. Though there was no food and no water here he was hopeful. One may live weeks without food, and days without water.

"I can summon help," he told the white-faced girl. "There will be a patrol-ship somewhere between here and Mars. Or I can raise Ferrok-Shahn—I had them a few hours ago with the radio. In two days at the most, help will come to us."

She watched him while in the starlit little cubby, with the silent dead ship beneath them, he sat at his call-key. But the radio would not operate!

They were marooned, alone—no, not quite alone. Outside the cubby doorway they heard a sound. A cry—or a groan. Then footsteps. From beyond the Captain's quarters, along the catwalk bridge, the figure of Kol the Martian came staggering. He too had escaped death. There were three of them up here to share this air, to struggle for their lives together.

He staggered into Graham's cubby. His face was green-grey with fear. He was uninjured. But he knew as well as Graham, their situation, and the terror of impending death was on him.

"Can you get help, Trent? The radio—"

"It isn't working."

"Then the helio-senders—"

"I was just getting ready to try them."

Kol was tremblingly eager to help. "It must work, Trent. It must! Marooned here! To die, slowly day by day suffocating here—Good God—"

Alma suddenly laughed. It was quavering, half hysterical. Graham touched her.

"Quiet, Alma. Don't let yourself start—like that. We're all right. I'll raise some patrol ship."

"I—I just thought—the Captain's midnight lunch! A glass of milk and those sandwiches. And a carafe of water. We have that much anyway."

The helio was working! For an hour Graham sat over the humming, whirling little mirrors, sending his amplified oscillating lightbeam into the darkness of space.

Kol was so humble. So pathetically eager for life.

"It must—it must bring help, Trent." He bent over the operator hardly aware of Alma's existence.

"Do your best, Trent. I am a rich man. Riches are yours if you save me."

The instinct for life comes first. But the man's cowardice after his former proud attitude was nauseating.

"Let go of me," Graham said irritably. "If you want to help, let me alone. Keep your mouth shut." He shook off the Martian's clutch. "Sit over there out of the way." This was no time for the regard of social positions. Danger strips us down to elementals.

Kol moved aside like a frightened child— The helio flashed the call of distress over and over again. Would someone answer it?

Then suddenly the magnifiers picked up a response.

"I've got it!" shouted Graham. "It's all right—they see me."

V.

Deadening Hours

THE signals had caught a patrol ship. Graham gave the *Comet's* position at the time of the accident. The patrol would come and find them. It was some million miles away—There was an interval of darkness, five minutes perhaps. Then Graham caught a final message. He flung off his switch; the helio current went dead. He turned his tense white face to his companions, but he was triumphant.

"It's all right now. They'll be here in ten hours or so. They've cut off—nothing more to say. We've ample air—and with the Captain's lunch we won't even be hungry."

Kol looked up. "You're sure?"

"Sure of what?"

"Sure that everything is all right?"

"Yes, they're positively coming. Don't look so frightened, Kol. You're safe enough now."

"You will need to send no more messages?"

"No. Nothing more to say. Besides, that damned helio uses too much of our air. Smell the chlorine?"

He disconnected the main helio-wires, and stood up. "Come on, you two, let's go in and see the Captain's lunch. We'll have to divide it up. Three parts—"

His arm went around Alma. He felt strangely happy—life had come to them again. A few hours more, and then rescue.

"Come on, Kol. Nothing to worry over now. We're safe enough."

Graham stood holding Alma. And suddenly Kol leaped upon them. His fist struck Graham full in the face. Graham staggered and fell. But he did not lose consciousness. He was aware that the Martian was trying to drag Alma away from the cubby. In the blurred starlight he could see their struggling forms. He felt himself floundering, lurching to regain his feet. He knocked over a chair. Kol and Alma were near the door, but she resisted as he dragged her.

And as Graham stood erect, with strength flooding back to him, Alma wrenched herself loose. She staggered and fell against Graham as he leaped forward.

"You all right, Alma?"

"Yes! Yes!"

Kol had disappeared through the doorway. A madness was on Graham. A lust to kill this ungrateful wretch who became an enemy instantly his safety was assured.

But Alma clung. "No! Graham, no! Not murder—"

She held him just a moment too long. It flashed to Graham that Kol had run toward the Captain's rooms. And in the chart-room was the Captain's arsenal of weapons hanging in a rack on the wall.

"Alma, let me go!"

He tore from her. But on the bridge outside the helio room he was halted. A bullet sang by him and flattened itself against the heavy metal wall plate of the cubby. Then another. The two reports reverberated through the dome-space; and in the doorway of the chart room he saw the crouching figure of Kol, with leveled rifle.

"Alma, get back!"

Graham turned. Another bullet thudded near him, as he jumped back into the cubby. From the chart room, rifle in hand, Kol was advancing along the catwalk.

Graham slid the heavy door closed, and barred it. Kol came up. They could see him through the glassite pane. He was wary at first, and then deciding that Graham was unarmed, he came boldly and tugged at the door. Found that it would not yield. Thumped upon it. And his voice floated dimly in on them.

"Open the door, you fool! You'll smother in there."

Graham did not answer. He stood with his arm around Alma, holding her close as she huddled tremblingly against him.

"Don't be frightened, Alma. He can't get in. Nor fire through the door, nor the walls. They're too thick."

It was true enough. But Graham was cold with realization nevertheless. The tiny cubby was bullet-proof. But it was air-proof also. Only a few cubic feet of air were in here, and with the door closed already it was air fouled by the helio's chlorine fumes. It could never last until the patrol ship came.

Hours had passed—long torturing hours, as the fouling air made each breath a gasp of pain. Their heads felt swelled—distended, and they had to reassure each other they were not floating through empty space.

How could they last until the patrol came.

"We can't stay here," Graham would say over and over. "This is death—"

Their ears were roaring with the diluted chlorine fumes and the poisonous carbon-dioxide; the precious oxygen every moment was lessening as their lungs took it in; used it.

VI.

A Desperate Move

OUTSIDE on the catwalk the Martian still lurked, rifle in hand. His only desire was to murder Graham before the rescue ship arrived. And Graham now knew why; Alma had swiftly told him hours ago with a rush of half-coherent words. The characteristic, murderous jealousy of a Martian thwarted. He had met Alma in Ferrok-Shahn. He was a professional collector of beauties, this rich Martian. His harem was famous in the city. He had wanted to add the beautiful Earthgirl to it. Repulsed, he had flown into an insane jealous rage and threatened her life. When she tried to escape, he had followed her to the *Comet* and embarked with her. So that

was it. Now the Martian was persistent—like a wolf.

A dozen times he had pounded on the door in the interplanetary code the message, "Hand over the girl and you can come out. Don't be a fool!"

At first Graham had flown into a rage and had all but opened the door to face the armed Martian. But he had laughed scornfully and had been content to reply, "When Hell freezes!"

But the Martian had persisted. Each half hour as the air in the helio-room became more and more poisoned, the Martian watching their paling faces had repeated with the diabolical unvarying signal, "Hand over the girl—don't be a fool!"

Graham's rage had given way to laughter then a growing despondency. The signals began to appear as sounds coming from another world—incidentally remote—

Then a desire for life would well up in him, and even as his arm tightened about Alma, something in him whispered, "Why die—why not hand her over—I'm young—" But a wave of revulsion for his weakness followed and he would get up to stamp about the room like a caged beast.

Knock—knock, knock—knock—That signal again—"Hand over the girl—" It was luck Alma couldn't understand it— But he must do something—he would go mad—

"I'm going out," said Graham crazily. "We can't stay here."

She clung to him. "Out! No, Graham dear! He'll kill you."

"Not out there, Alma. Out into space!"

"Space! But Graham—"

"I have a pressure suit. Wait, I'll show you. I should have tried it before. Alma, you won't be afraid to stay alone? I must—I must leave you." He told her swiftly.

"I think I can get around outside the ship. Into the pressure porte behind the Captain's cabin. If I can get in there—get another rifle—"

But Kol could see them now through the door-pane. He would be forewarned— Graham took a sheet from his bed. He and Alma draped it over the door; and Kol watched them with a sardonic grin.

"Good!" muttered Graham. "He misunderstands us. Alma, listen—after I've gone you pull aside a corner of this sheet. Cautiously! Make sure he is out there. If he starts away, shout at him. Talk to him. Keep him occupied. And talk to me, Alma! Talk loudly to me, as though I were here with you in this room. Will you—can you do that?"

"Yes! Yes, Graham."

"Your air here will be worse. I'll have to use some of it getting out." He held her for an instant. "Alma—I'll do my best. It's the only way—"

The pressure suit covered him from neck to the soles of his feet, like the suit of an ancient sea-diver. Its flexible material was double shelled, and between the shells, was an electrified vacuum. Graham flashed on the oscillatory current. The suit bloated, puffed into a monstrous semblance of human form.

"Now, my helmet, Alma. You're not too afraid to be left alone?"

She smiled bravely at him. "Do your best, Graham. Come back to me safely!"

Alone in Space! The thought of it set Graham trembling. He had never done it! No one had ever done it save in a case of desperate necessity— Alma helped him screw the goggling helmet to the metal collar of his suit. On his back and at his belt the air-renewal boxes and the batteries of the suit's pressure-resisting current stuck out as monstrous lumps.

Through his visor-pane he saw Alma smiling at him. Her lips framed, "Goodbye."

The door to the pressure porte slid open. The porte was a tiny metal room barely large enough for him to squeeze into. He wedged in, and the door slid closed after him. The air here was normal at one atmosphere of pressure. He had taken this much of Alma's precious air to fill it. With his gloved fingers he now felt for the porte's mechanisms— The pumps were working! A thrill of fear rushed at him that they would not operate, but they did.

A moment or two. By the room's dial-indicator, Graham saw the air-pressure lowering. He could feel the outward, explosive tugging of his suit until his own regulators met and resisted it.

A moment. Then, with the air in the tiny porte almost exhausted, Graham slid the outer panel. The great void of star-filled abyss yawned beside him. The last little air in the porte went out with a rush, dissipating into Space.

Graham crouched at the brink. A million million miles of emptiness was beneath him. Great blazing worlds down there in the black darkness. Graham poised, with an unconquerable thrill of fear surging—

And then he hitched himself forward; straightened at the threshold and with careful calculation dove head first into the void!

VII.

In Space!

AND he did not fall! Graham knew he would not, yet every instinct within him was shuddering. For a moment his senses reeled into chaos. Then they steadied. The firmament had swung. All the great shining star-points had shifted; oscillated; but in a moment they stopped; hung motionless.

Graham found himself floating. His forward dive, as he had calculated, flung him slowly out from the *Comet*. He had moved perhaps two hundred feet, sluggishly retarding—like a log shoved into a lake of placid water.

He had now come to rest. He lay in the void. Weightless. Helpless to move, save that he could futilely kick and twist. A world in himself! He was no longer the inhabitant of a planet; nor the inhabitant of a Space-ship. Himself a world, floating here with all the myriad forces of Celestial Mechanics acting upon him—

Graham twisted and saw, behind him two hundred feet away, the wrecked broken side of the

Comet. The ship lay as though cradled in water. A vague pang shot past him. He had loved this ship. It had throbbed beneath him for so many hours, so many voyages. It lay now wrecked; dying. Unbreathing, save up there in the one bulkhead area which encompassed his own tiny cubby where Alma was imprisoned; the catwalk where Kol the Martian lurked; and the Captain's quarters.

Graham's gaze went to the bow. It was mangled. The dome was bashed in where the asteroid had struck it a crushing blow. A great hole was there out of which had rushed all the precious air of the ship.

The side-deck porte-windows had held intact. The side and stern, as viewed from Graham's position now seemed almost as though the ship were unhurt and upon her course.

Relative to Graham, the *Comet* was not moving. It hung there with the great star-field behind and around it. Yet he knew that it was falling. The forces of every remote star of the Universe blended here now upon it had determined some movement. It was following some path; moving, somewhere—

Graham for that moment had been so absorbed he had forgotten himself. He was suddenly aware of an object passing close to him—slowly passing. He twisted to view it. Gruesome horror! The body of a man! One of the ship's crew, flung out here with the outrushing air through the break in the bow at the time of the collision. The body floated quietly past. It was twisted; huddled. He saw for an instant, its face. Gruesomely bloated; crimson-skinned where the blood had welled out through the pores—

The body went calmly by, down the length of the *Comet* in a circular path, and around the ship's end. It was a satellite now! Doomed forever to encircle the greater mass of the ship. And it had acquired a slow axial rotation of its own, turning end over end—

Graham was for a moment almost motionless. Soon, he knew, he would pick up some movement relative to the *Comet*. Himself a little world, acquiring now its orbit. He had calculated his dive. He could not see the captain's cabin nor the catwalk from here, nor could the Martian see him— He found presently that he was lagging behind the ship as it fell. He began floating toward the stern, and moving slightly inward upon what seemed a narrow ellipse—

It was what he wanted. If he had not chanced that, like the gruesome body, he too would have become a satellite. He was not quite helpless of movement. The pressure suit had a tiny rocket wavestream. It would endow him with motion, though when used, its slight charge would be soon exhausted.

Graham used it sparingly now. The natural orbit took him elliptically around the *Comet's* stern. He watched his opportunity, and shot from his shoulder-pouch the tiny blue-white vibratory beam. Its thrust was slight, but enough. He found himself moving inward; the *Comet* seemed coming toward him. And then, with its nearness, his newly acquired orbit was broken.

The ship's side pulled him with a swift acceleration—

He was turning end over end; the ship now above him, now beneath— A moment or two. Dizzying; confused. He was aware that he glimpsed the catwalk in the dome-peak, with the figure of Kol standing there. Had the Martian seen him? Graham could only hope not. Or, if so, his floating body, briefly seen, could be mistaken for those other bloated figures—

VIII.

In Hiding!

GRAHAM was aware of the *Comet's* side beneath him, and he was falling upon it— He saw it rushing up at him. There was an impact, broken by his metal suit. He struck against one of the deck's glassite window portes, slowly bounded away a few feet and then dropped back. This time he clung. Almost weightless; but he found that by holding to the outer protuberances of the ship's sides he could maintain his position.

He gained his feet. He was standing now on the side windowpane, his body sticking straight from it like a fly. He was standing upright and the wrecked ship lay on its side beneath him— He stooped and gazed down through the window. The deck-passage was a litter of wreckage. He could see the torn and broken doors of the superstructure's public rooms; the shattered panes of the interior cabin-windows. A myriad separate explosions and implosions had occurred in every portion of the ship with that first sudden rush of unequal pressures. He saw the strewn human bodies, lying where they had been stricken when the air left them— A woman clinging to a little girl lay in the Salon doorway where they had staggered gasping for air and had been suddenly overcome.

Graham started carefully walking. He had to turn away frequently at the sight of the lifeless figures— He was now not more than twenty feet from the upper pressure porte, which gave access to the chart room adjoining the Captain's cabin. He knew every foot of the ship, inside and out. The little superstructure containing the Captain's rooms was between him and the catwalk. Kol would not see him—unless he had seen him already . . . Graham reached the side of the chart room. The upper dome, still intact, bulged out under him. Alma was down in here . . .

Graham suddenly realized that all this had occupied at least a half hour. Or more? He prayed that it had been no more. The air in his cubby must be horribly fouled by now. He must hurry . . . Had Alma been able to hold out? Would he find her unconscious? Dead perhaps? Or, at the last, had her instinct for life been too great—had she opened the door for the Martian?

Graham's bloated gloved fingers trembled at the thought as he stooped for the outer control button of the chart room emergency porte. The panel slid aside. The half-exhausted air of the pressure-lock came up with a puff of wind. Graham saw, down in the darkness of the small room,

the automatic inner door to the chart-room slide closed. He stood a moment to get his balance and then dropped into the lock chamber and closed its outer door after him.

Normality returned at once. He landed up the side wall of the room; but the interior gravity of the *Comet*—maintained to simulate the gravity of Earth—immediately claimed him. He fell into a tumbled heap upon the floor. It seemed, instantly that the ship had righted herself and lay now upon an even keel . . .

There were a few moments while Graham lay in darkness, listening to the hiss of the air as it came in to fill the lock-chamber. Then the pressure was normal. Graham moved to the inner slide. In a moment he would be in the chart-room. He would seize a rifle; meet Kol on equal terms outside on the catwalk—

Some instinct of caution made Graham keep on his helmet, and maintain the air circulation within his pressure suit. He pulled the inner door lever; and as the panel slid aside, he drew suddenly back from the opening. Fortuitous caution! The figure of Kol with leveled rifle crouched in the chart-room. The rifle spat flame; the bullet missed Graham and thudded against the further metal wall of the lock.

Graham crouched motionless in the blackness. He was helpless here; but he believed that Kol had not seen him; had only fired assuming he would be in the opening when the panel slid aside. A moment passed. The Martian crept slowly forward. The chart-room was very dim, but Graham could see the blur of his figure. Kol presently thrust the rifle muzzle over the threshold, pointing it sidewise to command the lock's interior.

The muzzle, just for an instant, wavered past Graham's shoulder. He seized it; jerked at it. The spurt of its shot flashed past his visor . . . Impelled by the jerk, Kol came over the threshold and Graham seized him.

At once they were struggling. The rifle fell unheeded between them. They swayed, locked together, the Martian seemingly small in Graham's huge bloated grip. But the suit was hampering and Kol had the swift sure movements of a cat. In the narrow confines of the tiny pressure porte Graham staggered to the wall and rebounded. Kol was stooping for the rifle but again Graham was upon him.

Through the visor pane of his huge heavy helmet Graham could see almost nothing. He felt the Martian tearing at him, trying to rip his suit, shoving him away from where Graham realized that the rifle was lying . . .

They came, swaying upon their feet, locked together, with a thud against the wall. Kol's back was to it, with Graham pressing against him. A little shaft of light from the chart-room door struck upon the Martian's grey-green face. It was set with a leer.

And the shaft of light showed that for that instant, Kol's head was touching the metal wall of the lock . . . Graham stooped and with a desperate jerk of his neck struck his heavy helmet against the Martian's face. Through the audiophone contact Graham heard the man's queer split scream. For an instant he went limp.

Then he revived; was fighting again. But now Graham had him over by the outer pressure porte. It was closed; but with a free hand, Graham seized the lever. The panel slid open; the automatic chart-room door banged closed.

The air in the lock went out with a tumultuous rush. At the outer threshold Graham stood clinging, with Kol gripping him. But the Martian's hold in an instant broke away. His air was gone; he was choking. There was a faint gasp from his lips. Graham cast him loose, and the rush of pressure took him like a wind-blown feather. His body blew out into the void . . .

At the threshold Graham gazed into the starry abyss. Kol's body sailed slowly out, stiff as iron. And by chance that other man's body came floating calmly past. Kol collided with it and the two bodies, embraced in death, wavered, found their new orbit, and gruesomely locked together moved slowly on . . .

* * *

Graham renewed the lock-air; went through the chart-room; discarded his helmet and suit. White-faced and shuddering he pounded at the helio-room door.

"Alma! Alma, are you alive? It's Graham! Let me in!"

A horrible moment of silence.

Then the door slid. She lay on the floor gasping. But the rush of pure air revived her.

"Alma—"

"Graham—you—you came at last—"

They presently stood together at a window near the end of the catwalk gazing at the blazing stars . . . The locked bodies went slowly, inexorably, past . . .

"Don't look, Alma! Don't— But here, look off this way! Alma—the patrol ship! It's coming! See the lights?"

Against the blackness of Space and the great blazing stars, a tiny line of colored lights was swiftly advancing . . .

THE END

Another thrilling story by

Ray Cummings

"THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION"

appears in the February, 1931 Issue of Wonder Stories—on sale Jan. 1, 1931.