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The Red Spot of Jupiter

By Dennis McDermott



(Illustration by Marchioni)

With a wild wrench he tears free, stares wildly at the up-
rooted plants that still writhe greedily.

ELECTRO-MAGNETIC braking-discs heated cherry-red under the strain of slowing its awful speed, the Martian liner swept into its berth atop the mile-high, terraced city of New York.

A carriage of polished dural shot across the platform and vanished in the gaping side of the mighty streamlined ship lying in the launching ways, opposite the incoming Martian ship.

Dull thunder split the air, as the great rocket hurtled out into the darkness, the golden vapors from its tail slowly spreading into faint mist behind it—out-bound, with a Universe before it.

A uniformed guard resumed his measured pacing before the lift entrances. Two little trickles of humanity entered and left the sleeping Martian liner, while husky attendants in the blue of the Interplanetary Lines lifted into their waiting places new cylinders of the synthetic element, astron. Little knots of people formed and disrupted, little groups held by a common interest—botanists bound for the royal floral preserves of Laxa; engineers on their way to take their places with those who had striven

in vain to dam the mightiest river of all Venus, Murr, the Thunderer; students for the universities of Laxa and Ulda; powermen for the desert solar-plants; trippers and tourists with scrip enough to dare the rates of the Interplanetary Lines.

Other lone figures there were, sun-cured

by travel in far-flung places, wanderers of the planetary by-paths. With the gong, all was still and barren in the launching ways. A muffled voice raised in shouted question, a tardy port clanged, and with a thunderous drum of energy another leviathan of space was gone.

THOSE who have been privileged to travel into remote corners of the earth and see new forms of life, a sense of the wonder and diversity of nature has come with years. But the sights that these explorers have seen will be commonplace as compared to what explorers to other planets will see. For we will have then the great fruitfulness of nature working under conditions entirely different from anything occurring on earth.

Many readers have possibly sneered at some of the descriptions of extra-terrestrial life that have appeared in our pages. "It's very improbable," they say, "that these monstrosities could exist." But life itself is improbable, and we don't doubt the imagination of man is unable to conceive of the infinite diversity of life forms that nature may produce.

The present story by a new and promising author, may, if our readers like it, be the first of a series of interplanetary adventures involving Lem Gulliver and showing strange and mysterious life on other worlds. We would be glad to get our readers' comments.

* * *

Out beyond the Moon, the space-ship *Hermes* hurtles toward Mars and the outer Solar System. Courier of the god-named planets, driven by the unleashed energy of disintegrating atoms—energy of astron—it cleaves its timeless path through star-lit emptiness. Keen eyes scan the space-charts for occasional meteor swarms, and now and again a rumble of jets and an instant's golden glow in space tells of danger past. A few faces showed in the ports as the Moon swept by beneath, craters and mighty gorges showing dimly in the coppery Earth-shine. Only a few watched, for most men know the Moon better than their own planet. Still fewer gaze at the spangled vault that for three years will unfold about them—nebulae, stellar giants of vivid color, the blazing circlet of the Milky Way.

So the great interplanetary express goes forth in its mad rush to span space, out into the void where icy Neptune swims, and those other planets beyond—planets of the outer darkness. And deep in the ship's heart is a little lead-walled room, lit with a never-dying glare of cold light, where, behind

time-locked doors, a single man of Earth sits brooding—remembering.

He is a man of brute force and quick passion—black-browed, shaggy-maned, adhering to the matted beard that, like him, has long been outlawed by the races of the inner planets. In the days of the first space-lines he had been master of a great new ship, had betrayed it and fled from port to port of space, leaving death and disorder in his wake.

And now he sits and thinks—of Venus, and a woman in the gardens of Laxa, beneath the very eyes of the royal guards. He thinks of Earth, and long weeks of stealthy flight and cold terror in the lawless shadowland of the lower levels; and of those other rabbit-warrens of dimly luminous corridors, deep in the bowels of the Moon, where little fearful bands of hunted creatures fought and fed, bred and died among slimy things that dripped light; and of desert Mars, with its great lanes of green and its cities of low red rock, buried at the hubs whence the great rivers of vegetation rise and trickle out into the red wastes of wind-tossed sand. He thinks of Mars, and capture!

In his mind it all lives again. A crimson shadow in a crimson land, he slips like a wraith through deserted streets, clinging close to the low walls, starting in terror from open windows, the rich red blood of Earth on his hands and his face, and its warm, sweet-salt taste in his mouth, blood of him who had thought him a weakling, and whom he had broken like a twig in his two hands! Then from a shadowed doorway a cloaked figure steps, turns with a moment's answered twitter to someone hidden in the shadow, wheels with a flare of black and scarlet—an officer of the Martian police!

No time, no thought for flight. He leaps, stoops beneath the startled flurry of sword

and ray-pistol, drives straight forward with his mighty fist—like a thunderbolt strikes the blank white space between those goggling eyes!

Pagh! Like the shell of an egg the thing breaks, with a little taut pop and splash of brain as his fist bursts through, slimy and hot, squirming brain-stuff fouling his opened palm! For a long instant he struggles to free his hand from the paper-thin skull that clutches at his wrist and drags with the full weight of a falling body at his wounded arm. Then he is free, the pale green blood of the Martian dripping thinly from hand and arm—watery stuff, not strong and hot like the crimson blood of Earth.



DENNIS McDERMOTT

It is an instant too long. A yammering shriek of rage and frenzied hate shatters the shielding silence! Bright, stabbing light splits the shadow, blinding him. Dumbly he clutches at his head, where an ear has been seared to a twisted cinder, stands for an instant, then ducks and drives at the twittering form that hurtles from the shadow of the doorway—that damned Martian's woman!

With his wounded right arm he strikes up the ray-gun that again turns night to day. With his left he strikes out, straight from the shoulder, with a blow that his mighty Earth-born muscles give the power of a lightning-stroke. The twitter dies in a gurgling gasp, there is a brittle snap of ribs as a soft, bulging chest caves under his great fist, and now his right drives again, and again an egg-shell skull shatters and pale-green brain-stuff flows slowly down over blank, goggling eyes.

A moment he stays, to seize the ray-guns and the short-sword, then melts into the darkness as the street wakes into a frightened clamor of timorous twittering and the flare of ray-bursts. A few hurried seconds

of a hurried life—but the hell-cat of a Martian girl has marked him!

They caught him, that very night, as he slunk in the shadows that fled before the racing Martian moon that darted through the heavens. Two fell before his fists, after they had exploded his pistols in his hands and fused his sword by his side, but in the flurry of soft bodies a keen needle jabbed, once, and again, and his strength flowed out into the red shadows.

Martians do not kill a criminal—oh, no—they cure him! But the girl had been the daughter of a high police official—damned jade, messing about in the dark with young police officers—and he was a man not unknown or unwanted in other cities and on other planets. Bad luck always came from killing a Martian. His pal Red had said that, many a time, in the labyrinthine Moon-caves. No truer word had the old outlaw ever said—he could prove it—his first Martian and his first capture, since the old days when he was just a green, scared kid knifing a man for his scrip in the fifth level of old New York.

He'd always been lucky—and now they were sending him to Jupiter, to the little innermost moon, to take his place with those marooned, bestial outcasts of three planets whose luck had fallen down on them when they needed it. Haw! Luck! Gulliver's luck, they called it—*his* luck—in every rat-hole and fox-den of the Solar System, wherever his name was known! And now it had slipped out on him, like it always did when a guy killed a Martian.

Gulliver's luck! Funny, the guard had slipped him a couple of books, kids' books, down the food-tube. Nothing but a kid himself, that guard. Old books they were, and hard to read, copied off in short-hand on this new vellum from rotting volumes in some library, where the fragile pages of collodion-covered yellow paper turned slowly beneath their glass cases. There were pictures too, old pictures, that someone had photographed and sneaked out—funny-looking people and animals and such. "Alice in Wonderland" was one of them—just a crazy kids' book, but kind of hard to understand. The other one was different,

more the sort of thing he could get hold of—"Gulliver's Travels".

Funny, he was Gulliver too, and he sure had traveled some—more than that old Gulliver in the book. *He'd* had luck too, Gulliver's luck, what with giants and little pigmy people and talking horses, and those other crazy scientists, and those others with the flying cities. But nothing like what he had seen and heard and been through, here in this old Solar System! What were talking horses against grown-up bugs like those in the swamps of Venus—bugs that go into a fight like a regular army? What were these big space-ships but flying cities—flying further and faster than any of those in the book? And as for giants, or things like those little people—pshaw! Think they could do *him* in, like they did that old Gulliver in the book? Let 'em try it! Still and all, he was a good man in a scrape, book or no book, that old guy. He was a Gulliver, and he had Gulliver's luck!

So his thoughts ran as the huge liner throbbed its course among the stars—thoughts of his own rough life, and of the life of another Gulliver of Earth, a man of fantasy, of fiction, conceived by a master satirist nearly thirteen centuries before his birth.

Sometimes he thought of that living tomb ahead, where he must fight for food and shelter and life itself among the dregs of three planets—hairy brutes like himself from Earth and the Moon, tall gods without emotion from Venus, little fragile Martians that had run amuck under the strain of conditions on other planets than their own. Once, only once, police landed there to take off a man who had been pardoned, and it was nip and tuck for a while! He'd been a ship-master then, in charge of a government ship, a real captain in the service of the League.

Sometimes he wondered why he ever gave it all up and wrecked his ship for what he could salvage. He had been drunk, and sore too, sore over some woman, some woman on Venus—but that was long over, and he'd had some good times and good hauls since then, plenty of them! So here he was, cooped up in this leaden ray-proof room,

waiting for them to take him off and drop him on a space-island full of mad beasts. Bet that never happened to the old Gulliver! Still, he was a great old guy, and you never can tell what might have happened that he didn't feel like putting in writing. He knew how it was! And Gulliver's luck wasn't new—not by a long shot!

Gulliver's Strategy

MARS grew and blotted out the stars, an orange-red ball, snow-capped and penciled with wide lines and dots of grey-green. The mighty ship spawned in mid-space and went its silent way, a little plummet of polished metal dropping down past the two wheeling moons of Mars to the great Martian metropolis of Kulal at the tip of the Syrtia Major. Then all was tense, and a subdued thrill of excitement crept through the silent throng that lined the observation ports. It never fails to thrill passengers and even the crew and officers, when a liner passes through the belt of asteroids.

The ship had raised a little above the plane of the ecliptic, in order to pass well above the main belt, where the tiny "pocket-planets" were thickest and most dangerous. Many a man had died an awful death in emptiness as his ship careened, a shattered hulk, from a dark shape in the blackness. Now, below and on every side, they were showing as sunlight and light of the spaceship's great light-beams bathed them, little fainter dots of moving light against the star-flecked heavens. Passengers and crew alike clutched at the guard-straps for safety as the ship lurched under the rattle of deflecting jets.

Barely twenty miles away one of the smaller asteroids swept by—in the binoculars a dead waste of powdered pumice like the Moon. Men have been exiled here, and cast away by the misadventure of shipwreck, but none have told the tale. Clear from Mars to Jupiter, and beyond, this belt of scattered pigmy planets spread—stepping-stones of the Solar System.

Many a man of the early explorers and adventurers has laid his posts here in carefully charted orbits, and then, years or de-

cares later, has worked his tedious way out from rock to rock in space, out toward Jupiter and the greater Universe beyond. But now jets drum and rattle their message of safety, and the dancing specks of pale light thin as a new form looms ahead in the opening heavens—Jupiter, mightiest of the planets.

Now, in the little lead room at the ship's heart, a thin, invisible vapor is hissing through unseen openings, and a sweet scent of oblivion permeates the air. The bearded form sinks slowly in seeming sleep. A moment passes, and then a second gas hisses through pin-hole ducts, and in the air a faint white smoke forms and settles slowly in fine dust over the quiet form.

The door recedes, revealing walls of ten-foot lead, impervious to the ray-guns of rescuing or escaping criminals. Men come in, four of them, bundled in unwieldy space-suits that nearly treble their weight. They waddle to the sleeping prisoner, push and pull him into a suit like their own, but lacking the charge-belt and twin ray-pistols. A little flat-topped carriage on silent wheels purrs into the room behind them, the prisoner is lifted on it, and they leave him and vanish down the corridor.

After a long moment the still figure stirs, raises its head ever so slightly, listening. It rolls from the carriage, lands with a little thud on its padded feet, shuffles cunningly into another room across the narrow corridor. Soon it returns, thrusting a charge-belt and pistols into the ample pockets of the suit, climbs with difficulty upon the little carriage, and sinks again in feigned sleep, none too soon.

A bell rings harshly and like a phantom the gleaming carriage speeds down the corridor, winds its way to the outer skin of the ship's hull, where a sealed tube has opened. Quickly its end rises, tilting the still form into the waiting air-lock, which clicks shut and seals automatically. In the bow of the ship, a voice shouts, echoing from corridor to corridor over the loud-speakers. From the stern another answers. There is a barely perceptible lurch, a clang of scraping metal, and the great ship has spawned again.

In the single cabin of the tiny transport, four men gather round the controls and peer into the darkness ahead, regardless of the still form on the berth behind them. They talk, in the soft, slurred words of the thirty-first century—endings dropped, rough contractions used, grammar of the classics made subordinate to speed and universality of expression. Their voices are muffled by the padded insulation of the walls, helmets removed and hanging on their backs in the safety of their ship.

"Titan first, Cap?"

"No. We'll run him right through and then go back to the post. We don't have to check this one through for inspection—he's travelin' cold-storage. That is—unless we have to refuel. Got enough of the stuff?"

"Just a minute, 'till I look at the gauge. Sure, plenty. Six extra shells of astron an' a spare detonator. O.K. with you, Cap?"

"Sure. Say, Fred, what was that you took from the guy, there? Books? Give 'em here a minute."

"Yeah. I slipped 'em to him through the food-tube—loose vellum, no metal. I found 'em on a library smuggler last trip—a trusty goin' out to Titan for a year or so, for sellin' old books without a license. They're kids' books—real old ones that you can't get near outside a library, 'less you have someone to bootleg you one. I thought he might like 'em, bein' there all to himself. No harm done, far's I can see."

"Oh, no, naturally not! Suppose there was a poison-sheet in one of 'em—where'd we be now? I ask you that!"

"Not a chance, Cap. I gave each page the once-over an' dipped it in his food. He's alive, ain't he? Besides, how could he get us after we doped him?"

"OH, sure, he's plenty alive. But wait 'till he hits that hell down there—maybe that'll be another story! Still, he's plenty husky, an' I suppose most of 'em either know him or have his rep. There can't be very many who don't know all about Black Lem Gulliver, who cracked up the *Titan* for salvage on her first trip."

"Say, Cap. That's another funny thing. Look here. This is one of the books I let

him have—see, 'Gulliver's Travels'. Funny, ain't it? Lemuel Gulliver same as him. Maybe they're related, huh?"

"Maybe, but you won't catch him braggin' about it any, not if I know Black Lem! What time you got?"

"Twenty-forty. Be there in an hour. Goin' to give him a knife or somethin', 'fore you drop him? He'll need it."

"Sure, drop one in the cubby before you put him in. Frank, you go down in under and get the gas-tanks attached. We don't want to drop him into that place asleep! And Bill, you crawl aft and put a couple of those spare shells in the ways. We'll need them to get back. Then I can tip 'em in when the time comes."

"Say, Cap."

"What's the matter, Bill?"

"Better watch your step. This place is pretty close to the limit, an' if you have to use full power to get clear of Jupiter, we may not make Titan."

"I'll watch it up. We can't risk that for any crook alive! Hank, you act dopey. Poker last sleep-period?"

"Yeah, Cap. Say, that's some game, for an old-timer! Beats these new three-way chess-sets for speed by a light-year. An' it isn't a high-brow game, like chess, either."

"Oh, sure. I ain't kickin'—play it myself when I get a chance. But it won't look so good when we hit Titan. Go on an' crawl into the bunk—that one up over him. I'll wake you up when we get ready to dump him, if you want to see him sprawl and swim."

"O.K., Cap. Thanks a lot."

"All right with me, Hank."

For ten minutes, twenty, all is quiet. Below in the cubby Fred shuffles around attaching nozzles to the tanks of antidote for the sleep-gas. Aft, Bill is wedged between the jets, muscling two heavy shells of astron up into the rack that will tip them into the firing-chambers when the time comes. Hank is sprawled like a frog on his stomach in the canvas bunk, snoring. The lights off, to cut down the reflection from the cabin, Cap jockeys his firing lever. Meteors are pretty thick for comfort near Jupiter.

And now a tiny white disk swims out from behind the shielding bulk of the great planet, and Cap fairly glues himself to the controls. Behind him, a still form wakes into quick, stealthy life—the prisoner, Gulliver. On his back, he bends a knee and thrusts straight up for the sleeping man above, with all his great strength, straight for his stomach—a vulnerable spot in any race. A sick grunt and weak groan, and it is all over.

Cap wheels, grabbing at his ray-gun. A flash of white flame and his hand becomes a blackened stub—fingers seared by the criminal's ray. Again the ray blazes, even as he leaps—to crumple to the cabin-floor with a horrible blackened burn in his thigh.

In the aft passage, Bill is hurrying forward, gun in hand. Below, Fred is creeping toward the cabin hatch, ready to drop at the wink of an eye. The grim, bearded figure in the cabin runs the controls to neutral, drives the unconscious captain halfway to the cubby-hatch with a brutal kick, then crouches, guns ready, covering the door and hatch. A slender rod with polished tungsten electrode protrudes from the crack of the door—Bill's ray-gun. A flare of fire and it droops, fused, and the hidden guard is cursing with a seared finger. A second flash, as Fred drops again to the safety of the cubby, the heat of the ray turning the metal hatch cherry-red.

Gulliver speaks, sneering arrogance and brutal triumph in his voice.

"Listen, you, behind that door! Get out of there before I melt the hinges an' burn you out!"

Bill stumbles out of his hiding, gripping the wrist of his wounded hand in white-knuckled agony.

"Right. Now listen, an' you below. Me, I ain't goin' to be dropped, not here anyway. I can run this ship by myself, so I don't need help nor hindrance from you big-noses, see? I'm droppin' you, now. You have that knife you were goin' to give me, an' the feller in the cubby has his guns—all right, you can keep 'em. I never give a guy a dirty deal unless he gives me one—not even a big-nose.

"You there, with the burned hand. Hustle your cap'n down that hatch. He ain't

dead, just washed out by a little burn. An' take that stiff in the bunk. I ain't afraid of dead men, but they ain't nice company for a lone man like me. Come on' hustle! No stallin' or I'll drop you right out in space! There ain't too much time, an' I've got to find me a moon to hide on for a while."

From the floor comes the voice of the crippled captain. "You call yourself a cap'n! You damned fool, look out of that port behind you!"

"Yah! That's an old trick—an' you with a ray-gun left! Think I'm green anywhere?"

"Stow it! I had the controls set to curve in to the moon, didn't I? An' you threw 'em neutral—a real cap'n like you! Go ahead, look out, if you ain't yellow! Where's the moon, hey? Yeah, an' where's Jupiter? You poor fool, you've killed us all, an' you're in the same boat with the rest of us!"

The Plunge to Jupiter!

FEAR seizing him, Gulliver wheels, stares for an instant, turns back snarling. There is no innermost moon to be seen—in its stead huge Jupiter blots out the stars, as the little ship rushes headlong into its sea of frozen clouds, whence no man has returned and told the tale!

"So that's the way it is, huh? We all die together, do we? Well, mister big-nose, if any one of us four lives I'm elected, see? Get down that hatch before I ray you! Quick! I ain't gabbin'! An' if your damn' ship is any good at all, I'm out of here, see, if you have to stay. I've seen a thing or two in my day that most men have never even heard of! I've been here before, see, an' I ain't dead yet nor ain't goin' to be!"

Alone in the cabin of the falling ship, fingering nervously the unfamiliar controls, the ex-captain stares from the broad port, trying their effect. He hasn't run this kind of ship, doesn't know the ropes as he used to. Still, it would be easy—just try 'em all gently an' sort 'em out. There—see? These are the jets here. That's the cubby-port; that's the main port; that must be the lever to load the firing chambers. Cinch,

if you know how! All set now—it's up to luck, to Gulliver's luck.

The great bulk of Jupiter has blotted out all the starry heavens with its huge ball of swirling clouds, banded by the equatorial gales that circle the planet. Now, easy with the laterals, easy, and they're in the atmosphere, clouds of needle-crystals swirling all about them, mighty winds ripping and tearing at every projection of the stream-lined hull, the ship flattening out in a long, level glide that will bring them spiraling out of the blind greyness of the clouds, down to where he can see to navigate. He has been here before, he knows his way about.

Now the clouds drift up and the mightiest of the planets lies far below the scudding ship—desolation rampant. Crags, deserts, great ranges and wind-carved, time-worn plateaus—all of the blue-green ice of the outer planets, ice that has lain hidden for ages under the cloud-drift that men see. But it is not barren ice that he seeks, but another thing by far, and as the rocket sinks slowly he sees his goal rising above the curve of the planet—the great Red Spot of Jupiter.

The ice has nearly all vanished, and harsh black rock juts in its stead in a chaotic wilderness where no ship can land unwrecked. He is uneasy, the controls are unfamiliar, do not respond as he would like. He is close to the crags now, too close, closer than he has ever been. He can see great rivers, torrents of ice and water, flowing in the heat of the Spot. The great mass of the planet, too, is making itself felt, and he reacts to stimuli sluggishly. But the Red Spot is close now, and the great updraft of hot air that will hurl them above the clouds, to safety.

Like a crimson mountain it looms ahead, and already great winds are sweeping them into the maelstrom. But it is hot, and his feet and hands feel heavy—it is hard to think and act. No, he has never been so low—he can see the region about the base of the Spot, cloaked in rising vapor that is torn to shreds by the gales. It is like a deep bowl all around the great oval of the Spot, deep and green with rank vegetation. There are swamps, where the waters of the great rivers

fester and rise to mist in the frozen clouds. There are great forests, and long, low plains—all gleaming strangely in the lurid glare of the Spot. And the ship is low, too low, and it is hot and hard to think.

Suddenly a towering range of narrow peaks shows below, ringing the lowland, and in the fearful up-draft of their slope the little rocket-ship is gripped and hurled end over end aloft! Madly Gulliver jerks at the firing-lever, the jets cough—and die, burnt out! As he grabs at the reloader, the fury of the upper winds cuts into the buoying up-draft, and like a bit of down the ship is tossed by the tempest! Hurlled clear across the cabin, he creeps toward the lever, inch by inch, year by year. Beyond the port, the red hell of the Spot glares evilly at his staring eyes and working lips. Inch by inch—but the mountains are gone, and the falling air drops them mile on mile toward the ghastly green swamplands. A lurch throws him headlong against the controls—too late!

He gropes madly, blindly for the lever that is safety—yanks wildly at whatever his hands meet with! Clang! Wings of metal spring from the ship's sides buoying it to the planet's surface. There, that one—no—the other. The entry-port crashes open with a rush of pressing air, and as he stares dazedly at the rushing ground beneath, he sees dully four figures hurtling end over end toward the swamp below. For a brief instant the ship levels, then plunges toward the forest, and in that instant he leaps. The narrow plain that rings the swamp is rushing up to meet him, faster, faster. It is hard to breathe. Then something strikes his back with awful force and the world goes black!

* * *

SLOWLY he woke, gasping for breath. The air was thick, stifling and unbearably hot and humid, trying to burst into his body and strangle him. His ears throbbed with a dull thunderous roar, from the greater air-pressure, and an awful weight was bearing him down. Slowly, painfully he rolled over on his face, pressed down into the thick, springy moss by the enormous pull of Jupiter's gravitation. Inch by inch

he gathered his limbs beneath him, struggling against the weight of his space-suit—five hundred pounds of matter crushing him into the ground. His head rose above the moss; he looked about him.

Above the forest the great Red Spot loomed through the rising mists—a huge mountain of molten rock, oval, raised from the planet's face by the whirling centrifuge and tidal drag that will some day rip it free and give it birth—another moon for the sovereign of the planets. Then the forest—a matted tangle of unearthly olive-green tree-forms, glossy and uncannily still—at its edge the rocket, by Fate's whim unharmed in its fall.

With superhuman strength he surged to his feet, then dropped with a grunt of released breath and wormed about to face the swamp-edge, whence a flaming ray has hissed past him in a torrent of whirling, heated air! Four forms grovel in the mud of the swamp—one motionless. A ray-gun blazes again, searing the moss beside him, sending up a stifling stench, the moss seeming to writhe away in alarm as air-currents whip it.

His own ray flames—one form crumples with a yell of agony, an arm neatly gone, and as neatly cauterized by the heat of the ray. He cannot see, but it sounded like Fred, the young feller who gave him the books. Funny about those books. Bet that other old Gulliver never had a fight like this!

Hours pass, hours of darting rays and shriveling moss and flesh. Gulliver has been hit twice—one arm is dead from the elbow down—but in the swamp one man alone returns his fire—Bill. For a long time he has been quiet. Maybe he has run out of charges for his gun. Probably it's just a trick to draw his fire and make a target. What the hell? The damned fool is gettin' up—tryin' to move toward him—yellin' at him! Tryin' to pull a charge, hey? Not on this baby! Spat! Spat! Got him—got him, by God! They're done for—all four of 'em, the damned big-noses! Tryin' to get him!

What was that he was yellin' when he was burned down? Somethin' about back

—back of you. That old kids' trick again! Huh! Tryin' *that* on *him*, on Lem Gulliver! Damned fool!

What the hell? Seems like he's sinkin' deeper in the moss, or else it's growin' higher. There's a kind of wormy, squirmin' movement goin' on underneath him, like he was lyin' on somethin' that was tryin' to wriggle out! Funny feelin', nasty an' creepy-like. He rolls over on his back, laboriously. Funny, there's a great big flower bendin' over him, an' there's another—three more, all around him. He can see more beyond. They weren't there before—he'd stake his life on that! What kind of a place was this, anyway? Too damned funny for him, it was! Of the places he'd seen, this beat all of 'em by a long sight!

Where he'd been lying the moss seemed to be writhing under his hand, squirming out from under it and creeping over it on all sides. Where he was, he could feel it wriggle under his back, and see it sort of bending over him where he pressed against it. It felt a lot like little fine feelers on his hand, little fine roots of the moss running all over the back of his hand. What the hell? That hurt! Damned if those roots weren't tryin' to cram into his pores an' under his fingernails—no way at all for moss to act! Take those flowers, too, great big purple cups, all splattered with gold, with little red tubes like feelers on the inside. Let's see, there ought to be four of 'em.

Four—there are ten, twelve—hey, what *is* this? The damned things are growin' up all around him, creepin' right up on him while he lies there! *It ain't right!*

Somethin' is drippin' on his face—wet an' warm an' sweet-smellin', like perfume. Makes him want to sleep—funny feelin'. Ow! That was in his eye—it burned like fire! What the hell? Some on his hand—let's look at it. Hey, it's purple stuff an' it won't rub off, it's set right into his skin! It's juice from those damned flowers drippin' on him—puttin' him to sleep! Damn it, *it ain't right!*

Good God, the damned thing's tryin' to strangle him, smother him—little thin red tentacles winding about his throat, a great

fleshy hood of livid purple closing down over his face, flooding his panting lungs with the sickly sweet odor of death. Another is on his wrist, striving with the moss-threads to worm down into his veins and drain him of life. God, they're attackin' him!

With a mad wrench he tears free, stares wildly at the uprooted plants that still writhe greedily with evil life, at the wiry moss scuttling over the surface of the ground where he has lain. Damned plants, tryin' to get him too! Well, let 'em try! Gulliver's luck holds!

But now comes a hushed sound, a muffled whisper, a scraping rustle, from behind him. Behind—look behind! That's what the guard yelled! With a surge of giant muscles he tears his laden body from the clinging moss, struggles to his knees, and stares in mounting horror. Moss—flowers—and *now the forest is marching to the attack!*

Once he screams—the only scream of fear in his life of danger. Then surging muscles bear him up and he hurls his body forward—toward the trees that are sweeping down upon him with a rustle of eager branches and a scrape of writhing roots, hungry for the kill!

To an observer, he must have seemed a giant toad—a misshapen monster, toppling forward across the hungry moss in great struggling hops, two—three feet in every lurch. And still the forest-front creeps on undaunted to meet the creature that leaps and crawls to do it combat—a man of Earth, unafraid!

Thick leaves whisper greedily among themselves. Drooping, tentacular twigs stir eagerly and uneasily, looping and twining in hunger. Great smooth-barked roots worm forward, hump upward, inch their way through the thick moss, that is itself moving in shadowy ripples that converge

on the lone man who creeps and lurches ever onward to the fray.

He has halted, a limbless human stump, squatting half buried in the moss—waiting. His laboring brain whirls, his ears roar with the pressure of the atmosphere, his breath comes slowly, heavily, for the air is thick and heavy to his aching lungs.

The many hungry blossoms hurry forward on hunching roots, their purple sucking-cups nodding, racing the great trees for the prey. The moss ripples faster, the murmur of fleshy leaves has become a minor roar as of distant winds. And still he sits and waits, as the deadly circle forms and closes in on every side.

His ray-guns blaze, again, many times; fanning in a broad angle! Through the surging jungle a great swath of death has been carved, straight to the rocket-ship. In great five-foot dives he bounds forward, driving his failing body to new struggles, new feats of strength and daring. Over charred, still-twisting tree-forms, over seared and matted moss, over cinders that have been flower-cups with little living red tentacles, he beats his way—to the ship and safety. Behind, the lane narrows, closes in after him, but the lever is thrown, the jets fueled, and with a thunder that sets the leaves and tendrils into a frenzy of agony, the ship sweeps forward and up!

Below, at the swamp's edge, four long, narrow mounds show faintly in the eagerly stirring green slime. Now the fierce up-pouring chimney of the great Red Spot has caught him, and like a bit of fine down he is hurled aloft in the grip of the winds—up through torn cloud-levels, up, and out into starry emptiness. And as the belted bulk of mighty Jupiter shrinks astern and a Universe opens ahead, the lone eye of the great Red Spot winks applause to Lemuel Gulliver, Black Lem of Earth, who has met his world of giants and has won!

THE END