

THE RED HELL OF JUPITER

A Thrilling Interplanetary
Novelette by
PAUL ERNST



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A Complete Novelette

By Paul Ernst

*What is the mystery centered in Jupiter's famous "Red Spot"?
Two fighting Earthmen, caught by the "Pipe-men" like their
vanished comrades, soon find out.*



At this the titanic thing went wholly, colossally mad.

CHAPTER I

The Red Spot

Commander Stone, grizzled chief of the Planetary Exploration Forces, acknowledged Captain Brand Bowen's salute and beckoned him to take a seat.

Brand, youngest officer of the division to wear the triple-V for distinguished service, sat down and stared curiously at his superior. He hadn't the remotest idea why he had been recalled from leave: but that it was on a matter of some importance he was sure. He hunched his big shoulders and awaited orders.

"Captain Bowen," said Stone. "I want you to go to Jupiter as soon as you can arrange to do so, fly low over the red area in the southern hemisphere, and come back here with some sort of report as to what's wrong with that infernal death spot."

He tapped his radio stylus thoughtfully against the edge of his desk.

"As you perhaps know, I detailed a ship to explore the red spot about a year ago. It never came back. I sent another ship, with two good men in it, to check up on the disappearance of the first. That ship, too, never came back. Almost with the second of its arrival at the edge of the red area all radio communication with it was cut off. It was never heard from again. Two weeks ago I sent Journeyman there. Now *he* has been swallowed up in a mysterious silence."

An exclamation burst from Brand's lips. Sub-Commander Journeyman! Senior officer under Stone, ablest man in the expeditionary forces, and Brand's oldest friend!

Stone nodded comprehension of the stricken look on Brand's face. "I know how friendly you two were," he said soberly. "That's why I chose you to go and find out, if you can, what happened to him and the other two ships."

Brand's chin sank to rest on the stiff high collar of his uniform.

"Journeyman!" he mused. "Why, he was like an older brother to me. And now ... he's gone."

There was silence in Commander Stone's sanctum for a time. Then Brand raised his head.

"Did you have any radio reports at all from any of the three ships concerning the nature of the red spot?" he inquired.

"None that gave definite information," replied Stone. "From each of the three ships we received reports right up to the instant when the red area was approached. From each of the three came a vague description of the peculiarity of the ground ahead of them: it seems to glitter with a queer metallic sheen. Then, from each of the three, as they passed over the boundary—nothing! All radio communication ceased as abruptly as though they'd been stricken dead."

He stared at Brand. "That's all I can tell you, little enough, God knows. Something ominous and strange is contained in that red spot: but what its nature may be, we cannot even guess. I want you to go there and find out."

Brand's determined jaw jutted out, and his lips thinned to a purposeful line. He stood to attention.

"I'll be leaving to-night, sir. Or sooner if you like. I could go this afternoon: in an hour—"

"To-night is soon enough," said Stone with a smile. "Now, who do you want to accompany you?"

Brand thought a moment. On so long a journey as a trip to Jupiter there was only room in a space ship—what with supplies and all—for one other man. It behooved him to pick his companion carefully.

"I'd like Dex Harlow," he said at last. "He's been to Jupiter before, working with me in plotting the northern hemisphere. He's a good man."

"He is," agreed Stone, nodding approval of Brand's choice. "I'll have him

report to you at once."

He rose and held out his hand. "I'm relying on you, Captain Bowen," he said. "I won't give any direct orders: use your own discretion. But I would advise you not to try to land in the red area. Simply fly low over it, and see what you can discern from the air. Good-bye, and good luck."

Brand saluted, and went out, to go to his own quarters and make the few preparations necessary for his sudden emergency flight.

The work of exploring the planets that swung with Earth around the sun was still a new branch of the service. Less than ten years ago, it had been, when Ansen devised his first crude atomic motor.

At once, with the introduction of this tremendous new motive power, men had begun to build space ships and explore the sky. And, as so often happens with a new invention, the thing had grown rather beyond itself.

Everywhere amateur space flyers launched forth into the heavens to try their new celestial wings. Everywhere young and old enthusiasts set Ansen motors into clumsily insulated shells and started for Mars or the moon or Venus.

The resultant loss of life, as might have been foreseen, was appalling. Eager but inexperienced explorers edged over onto the wrong side of Mercury and were burned to cinders. They set forth in ships that were badly insulated, and froze in the absolute zero of space. They learned the atomic motor controls too hastily, ran out of supplies or lost their courses, and wandered far out into space—stiff corpses in coffins that were to be buried only in time's infinity.

To stop the foolish waste of life, the Earth Government stepped in. It was decreed that no space ship might be owned or built privately. It was further decreed that those who felt an urge to explore must join the regular service and do so under efficient supervision. And there was created the Government bureau designated as the Planetary Exploration Control Board, which was headed by Commander Stone.

Under this Board the exploration of the planets was undertaken methodically and efficiently, with a minimum of lives sacrificed.

Mercury was charted, tested for essential minerals, and found to be a valueless rock heap too near the sun to support life.

Venus was visited and explored segment by segment; and friendly relations were established with the rather stupid but peaceable people found there.

Mars was mapped. Here the explorers had lingered a long time: and all over this planet's surface were found remnants of a vast and intricate civilization—from the canals that laced its surface, to great cities with mighty buildings still standing. But of life there was none. The atmosphere was too rare to support it; and the theory was that it had constantly thinned through thousands of years till the last Martian had gasped and died in air too attenuated to support life even in creatures that must have grown greater and greater chested in eons of adaptation.

Then Jupiter had been reached: and here the methodical planet by planet work promised to be checked for a long time to come. Jupiter, with its mighty surface area, was going to take some exploring! It would be years before it could be plotted even superficially.



Brand had been to Jupiter on four different trips; and, as he walked toward his quarters from Stone's office, he reviewed what he had learned on those trips.

Jupiter, as he knew it, was a vast globe of vague horror and sharp contrasts.

Distant from the sun as it was, it received little solar heat. But, with so great a mass, it had cooled off much more slowly than any of the other planets known, and had immense internal heat. This meant that the air—which closely approximated Earth's air in density—was cool a few hundred yards up from the surface of the planet, and dankly hot close to the ground. The result, as the cold air constantly sank into the warm, was a thick steamy blanket of

fog that covered everything perpetually.

Because of the recent cooling, life was not far advanced on Jupiter. Too short a time ago the sphere had been but a blazing mass. Tropical marshes prevailed, crisscrossed by mighty rivers at warmer than blood heat. Giant, hideous fernlike growths crowded one another in an everlasting jungle. And among the distorted trees, from the blanket of soft white fog that hid all from sight, could be heard constantly an ear-splitting chorus of screams and bellows and whistling snarls. It made the blood run cold just to listen—and to speculate on what gigantic but tiny-brained monsters made them.

Now and then, when Brand had been flying dangerously low over the surface, a wind had risen strong enough to dispel the fog banks for an instant; and he had caught a flash of Jovian life. Just a flash, for example, of a monstrous lizard-like thing too great to support its own bulk: or a creature all neck and tail, with ridges of scale on its armored hide and a small serpentine head weaving back and forth among the jungle growths.



Occasionally he had landed—always staying close to the space ship, for Jupiter's gravity made movement a slow and laborious process, and he didn't want to be caught too far from security. At such times he might hear a crashing and splashing and see a reptilian head loom gigantically at him through the fog. Then he would discharge the deadly explosive gun which was Earth's latest weapon, and the creature would crash to the ground. The chorus of hissings and bellowings would increase as he hastened slowly and laboriously back to the ship, indicating that other unseen monsters of the steamy jungle had flocked to tear the dead giant to pieces and bolt it down.

Oh, Jupiter was a nice planet! mused Brand. A sweet place—if one happened to be a two-hundred-foot snake or something!

He had always thought the entire globe was in that new, raw, marshy state. But he had worked only in one comparatively small area of the northern hemisphere; had never been within thirty thousand miles of the red spot. What might lie in that ominous crimson patch, he could not even guess. However, he reflected, he was soon to find out, though he might never live to

tell about it.

Shrugging his shoulders, he turned into the fifty story building in which was his modest apartment. There he found, written by the automatic stylus on his radio pad, the message: "Be with you at seven o'clock. Best regards, and I hope you strangle. Dex Harlow."

Dex Harlow was a six-foot Senior Lieutenant who had been on many an out-of-the-way exploratory trip. Like Brand he was just under thirty and perpetually thirsting for the bizarre in life. He was a walking document of planetary activity. He was still baked a brick red from a trip to Mercury a year before: he had a scar on his forehead, the result of jumping forty feet one day on the moon when he'd meant to jump only twenty; he was minus a finger which had been irreparably frost-bitten on Mars; and he had a crumpled nose that was the outcome of a brush with a ten-foot bandit on Venus who'd tried to kill him for his explosive gun and supply of glass, dyite-containing cartridges.

He clutched Brand's fingers in a bone-mangling grip, and threw his hat into a far corner.

"You're a fine friend!" he growled cheerfully. "Here I'm having a first rate time for myself, swimming and planing along the Riviera, with two more weeks leave ahead of me—and I get a call from the Old Man to report to you. What excuse have you for your crime?"

"A junket to Jupiter," said Brand. "Would you call that a good excuse?"

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Dex. "Wouldn't you know it? Of course you'd have to pick a spot four hundred million miles away from all that grand swimming I was having!"

"Would you like to go back on leave, and have me choose someone else?" inquired Brand solemnly.

"Well, no," said Dex hastily. "Now that I'm here, I suppose I might as well go through with it."

Brand laughed. "Try and get you out of it! I know your attitude toward a real

jaunt. And it's a real jaunt we've got ahead of us, too, old boy. We're going to the red spot. Immediately."

Dex's sandy eyebrows shot up. "The red spot! That's where Coblenz and Heiroy were lost!"

"And Journeyman," added Brand. "He's the latest victim of whatever's in the hell-hole."

Dex whistled. "Journeyman too! Well, all I've got to say is that whatever's there must be strong medicine. Journeyman was a damn fine man, and as brave as they come. Have you any idea what it's all about?"

"Not an idea. Nobody has. We're to go and find out—if we can. Are you all ready?"

"All ready," said Dex.

"So am I. We'll start at eleven o'clock in one of the Old Man's best cruisers. Meanwhile, we might as well go and hunt up a dinner somewhere, to fortify us against the synthetic pork chops and bread we'll be swallowing for the next fortnight."

They went out; and at ten minutes of eleven reported at the great space ship hangars north of New York, with their luggage, a conspicuous item of which was a chess board to help while away the long, long days of spacial travel. Brand then paused a little while for a final check-up on directions.

They clambered into the tiny control room and shut the hermetically sealed trap-door. Brand threw the control switch and precisely at eleven o'clock the conical shell of metal shot heavenward, gathering such speed that it was soon invisible to human eyes. He set their course toward the blazing speck that was Jupiter, four hundred million miles away; and then reported their start by radio to Commander Stone's night operator.

The investigatory expedition to the ominous red spot of the giant of the solar system was on.

CHAPTER II

The Pipe-like Men

Brand began to slacken speed on the morning of the thirteenth day (morning, of course, being a technical term: there are no horizons in space for the sun to rise over). Jupiter was still an immense distance off; but it took a great while to slow the momentum of the space ship, which, in the frictionless emptiness of space, had been traveling faster and faster for nearly three hundred hours.

Behind them was the distant ball of sun, so far off that it looked no larger than a red-hot penny. Before them was the gigantic disk of Jupiter, given a white tinge by the perpetual fog blankets, its outlines softened by its thick layer of atmosphere and cloud banks. Two of its nine satellites were in sight at the moment, with a third edging over the western rim.

"Makes you think you're drunk and seeing triple, doesn't it?" commented Dex, who was staring out the thick glass panel beside Brand. "Nine moons! Almost enough for one planet!"

Brand nodded abstractly, and concentrated on the control board. Rapidly the ship rocketed down toward the surface. The disk became a whirling, gigantic plate; and then an endless plain, with cloud formations beginning to take on definite outline.

"About to enter Jupiter's atmosphere." Brand spoke into the radio transmitter. Over the invisible thread of radio connection between the space ship and Earth, four hundred million miles behind, flashed the message.

"All right. For God's sake, be careful," came the answer, minutes later. "Say something at least every half hour, to let us know communication is unbroken. We will sound at ten second intervals."

The sounding began: *peep*, a shrill little piping noise like the fiddle of a cricket. Ten seconds later it came again: *peep*. Thereafter, intermittently, it

keened through the control room—a homely, comforting sound to let them know that there was a distant thread between them and Earth.

Lower the shell rocketed. The endless plain slowly ceased its rushing underneath them as they entered the planet's atmosphere and began to be pulled around with it in its revolution. Far to the west a faint red glow illumined the sky.

The two men looked at each other, grimly, soberly.

"We're here," said Dex, flexing the muscles of his powerful arms.

"We are," said Brand, patting the gun in his holster.

The rapid dusk of the giant planet began to close in on them. The thin sunlight darkened; and with its lowering, the red spot of Jupiter glared more luridly ahead of them. Silently the two men gazed at it, and wondered what it held.

They shot the space ship toward it, and halted a few hundred miles away. Watery white light from the satellites, "that jitter around in the sky like a bunch of damned waterbugs," as Dex put it, was now the sole illumination.

They hung motionless in their space shell, to wait through the five-hour Jovian night for the succeeding five hours of daylight to illumine a slow cruise over the red area that, in less than a year, had swallowed up three of Earth's space ships. And ever as they waited, dozing a little, speculating as to the nature of the danger they faced, the peep, peep of the radio shrilled in their ears to tell them that there was still a connection—though a very tenuous one—with their mother planet.

Red spot ten miles away," said Brand in the transmitter. "We're approaching it slowly."

The tiny sun had leaped up over Jupiter's horizon; and with its appearance they had sent the ship planing toward their mysterious destination. Beneath

them the fog banks were thinning, and ahead of them were no clouds. For some reason there was a clarity unusual to Jupiter's atmosphere in the air above the red section.

"Red spot one mile ahead, altitude forty thousand feet," reported Brand.

He and Dex peered intently through the port glass panel. Ahead and far below, their eyes caught an odd metallic sheen. It was as though the ground there were carpeted with polished steel that reflected red firelight.

Tense, filled with an excitement that set their pulses pounding wildly, they angled slowly down, nearer to the edge of the vast crimson area, closer to the ground. The radio keened its monotonous signal.

Brand crawled to the transmitter, laboriously, for his body tipped the scales here at nearly four hundred pounds.

"We can see the metallic glitter that Journeyman spoke of," he said. "No sign of life of any kind, though. The red glow seems to flicker a little."

Closer the ship floated. Closer. To right and left of them for vast distances stretched the red area. Ahead of them for hundreds of miles they knew it extended.

"We're right on it now," called Brand. "Right on it—we're going over the edge—we're—"

Next instant he was sprawling on the floor, with Dex rolling helplessly on top of him, while the space ship bounced up twenty thousand feet as though propelled by a giant sling.



The peep, peep of the radio signalling stopped. The space ship rolled helplessly for a moment, then resumed an even keel. Brand and Dex gazed at each other.

"What the hell?" said Dex.

He started to get to his feet, put all his strength into the task of moving his Jupiter-weighted body, and crashed against the top of the control room.

"Say!" he sputtered, rubbing his head. "Say, what *is* this?"

Brand, profiting by his mistake, rose more cautiously, shut off the atomic motor, and approached a glass panel again. "God knows what it is," he said with a shrug. "Somehow, with our passing into the red area, the pull of gravity has been reduced by about ten, that's all."

"Oh, so that's all, is it? Well, what's happened to old Jupe's gravity?"

Again Brand shrugged. "I haven't any idea. Your guess is as good as mine."

He peered down through the panel, and stiffened in surprise.

"Dex!" he cried. "We're moving! And the motor is shut off!"

"We're drawing down closer to the ground, too," announced Dex, pointing to their altimeter. "Our altitude has been reduced five thousand feet in the last two minutes."

Quickly Brand turned on the motor in reverse. The space ship, as the rushing, reddish ground beneath indicated, continued to glide forward as though pulled by an invisible rope. He turned on full power. The ship's progress was checked a little. A very little! And the metallic red surface under them grew nearer as they steadily lost altitude.

"Something seems to have got us by the nose," said Dex. "We're on our way to the center of the red spot, I guess—to find whatever it was that Journeyman found. And the radio communication has been broken somehow...."

Wordlessly, they stared out the panel, while the shell, quivering with the strain of the atomic motor's fight against whatever unseen force it was that relentlessly drew them forward, bore them swiftly toward the heart of the vast crimson area.



"Look!" cried Brand.

For over an hour the ship had been propelled swiftly, irresistibly toward the center of the red spot. It had been up about forty thousand feet. Now, with a jerk that sent both men reeling, it had been drawn down to within fifteen thousand feet of the surface; and the sight that was now becoming more and

more visible was incredible.

Beneath was a vast, orderly checkerboard. Every alternate square was covered by what seemed a jointless metal plate. The open squares, plainly land under cultivation, were surrounded by gleaming fences that hooked each metal square with every other one of its kind as batteries are wired in series. Over these open squares progressed tiny, two legged figures, for the most part following gigantic shapeless animals like figures out of a dream. Ahead suddenly appeared the spires and towers of an enormous city!

Metropolis and cultivated land! It was as unbelievable, on that raw new planet, as such a sight would have been could a traveler in time have observed it in the midst of a dim Pleistocene panorama of young Earth.

It was instantly apparent that the city was their destination. Rapidly the little ship was rushed toward it; and, realizing at last the futility of its laboring, Brand cut off the atomic motor and let the shell drift.

Over a group of squat square buildings their ship passed, decreasing speed and drifting lower with every moment. The lofty structures that were the nucleus of the strange city loomed closer. Now they were soaring slowly down a wide thoroughfare; and now, at last, they hovered above a great open square that was thronged with figures.

Lower they dropped. Lower. And then they settled with a slight jar on a surface made of reddish metal; and the figures rushed to surround them.



Looking out the glass panel at these figures, both Brand and Dex exclaimed aloud and covered their eyes for a moment to shut out the hideous sight of them. Now they examined them closely.

Manlike they were: and yet like no human being conceivable to an Earth mind. They were tremendously tall—twelve feet at least—but as thin as so many animated poles. Their two legs were scarce four inches through, taperless, boneless, like lengths of pipe; and like two flexible pipes they were joined to a slightly larger pipe of a torso that could not have been more than a foot in diameter. There were four arms, a pair on each side of the cylindrical

body, that weaved feebly about like lengths of rubber hose.

Set directly on the pipe-like body, as a pumpkin might be balanced on a pole, was a perfectly round cranium in which were glassy, staring eyes, with dull pupils like those of a sick dog. The nose was but a tab of flesh. The mouth was a minute, circular thing, soft and flabby looking, which opened and shut regularly with the creature's breathing. It resembled the snout-like mouth of a fish, of the sucker variety; and fish-like, too, was the smooth and slimy skin that covered the beanpole body.

Hundreds of the repulsive things, there were. And all of them shoved and crowded, as a disorderly mob on Earth might do, to get close to the Earthmen's ship. Their big dull eyes peered in through the glass panels, and their hands—mere round blobs of gristle in the palms of which were set single sucker disks—pattered against the metal hull of the shell.

"God!" said Brand with a shudder. "Fancy these things feeling over your body...."

"They're hostile, whatever they are," said Dex. "Look out: that one's pointing something at you!"

One of the slender, tottering creatures had raised an arm and leveled at Brand something that looked rather like an elongated, old-fashioned flashlight. Brand involuntarily ducked. The clear glass panel between them and the mob outside gave him a queasy feeling of being exposed to whatever missile might lurk in the thing's tube.

"What do we do now?" demanded Dex with a shaky laugh. "You're chief of this expedition. I'm waiting for orders."

"We wait right here," replied Brand. "We're safe in the shell till we're starved out. At least they can't get in to attack us."

But it developed that, while the slimy looking things might not be able to get in, they had ways of reaching the Earthmen just the same!

The creature with the gun-like tube extended it somewhat further toward Brand.

Brand felt a sharp, unpleasant tingle shoot through his body, as though he had received an electric shock. He winced, and cried out at the sudden pain of it.

"What's the matter—" Dex began. But hardly had the words left his mouth when he, too, felt the shock. A couple of good, hearty Earth oaths exploded from his lips.

The repulsive creature outside made an authoritative gesture. He seemed to be beckoning to them, his huge dull eyes glaring threateningly at the same moment.

"Our beanpole friend is suggesting that we get out of the shell and stay awhile," said Dex with grim humor. "They seem anxious to entertain us —*ouch!*"

As the two men made no move to obey the beckoning gesture, the creature had raised the tube again; and again the sharp, unpleasant shock shot through them.

"What the devil are we going to do?" exclaimed Brand. "If we go out in that mob of nightmare things—it's going to be messy. As long as we stay in the shell we have some measure of protection."

"Not much protection when they can sting us through metal and glass at will," growled Dex. "Do you suppose they can turn the juice on harder? Or is that bee-sting their best effort?"

As though in direct answer to his words, the blob-like face of the being who seemed in authority convulsed with anger and he raised the tube again. This time the shock that came from it was sufficient to throw the two men to the floor.

"Well, we can't stay in the ship, that's certain," said Brand. "I guess there's only one thing to do."

Dex nodded. "Climb out of here and take as many of these skinny horrors with us into hell as we can," he agreed.