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Interplanetary Hunter

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THE HOTHOUSE WORLD

Chapter I. The Ark

Day again — one hundred and seventy dragging hours of throttling, humid heat. An interminable period of monotony lived in the eternal mists, swirling with sluggish dankness, enervating, miasmatic, pulsant with the secret whisperings of mephitic lifeforms. That accounted for the dull existence of the Venusian trader, safe in the protection of his stilt-legged trading post twenty feet above the spongy earth — but bored to the point of madness.

Tommy Strike stepped out from under the needle-spray antiseptic shower that was the Earthman's chief defense against the myriad malignant bacterial infections swarming the hothouse that is Venus. He grabbed a towel, made a pass at the lever to turn on the refrigeration unit that preserved them during the hot days, shut off the night heating system and yelled:

“Roy! Awake! Arise! Today's the great day! The British are coming! Wake up for the event!”

Roy Ransom, Strike's assistant staggered into view, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“British?” he mumbled. “What British?”

“Why, Gerry Carlyle! The great Carlyle is coming today. In his special ship, with his trained crew, straight from the Interplanetary Zoo in London. The famous ‘Catch-‘em-alive Carlyle’ is on his way and we're the lucky guys chosen to guide him on his expedition on Venus!”

Ransom scratched one thick hairy leg and stepped under the shower with a sour expression. “Ain't that somethin'?” he inquired.

“You don't look with favor on Mister Carlyle?” Strike chuckled.

“No, I don't. I've heard all I want to hear about him. Capturing animals from different planets and bringing them back alive to the Zoo in London is all right. I'd like the job myself. But any guy that rates the sickening amount of publicity

he does must have something phony about ‘im.” He kicked toward the short-wave radio in one corner of the living room.

“Bein’ so close to the sun, we’re lucky if we bring in a couple of Earth programs a day through the interference. An’ it seems to me every damn’ one of ‘em has somethin’ about the famous Carlyle. Gerry Carlyle eats Lowden’s Vita-cubes on expedition. Gerry Carlyle smokes germ-free Suaves. Gerry Carlyle drinks refreshen’ Alka-lager. Pfui!

“An’ now we’re ordered to slog around this drippin’ planet for ‘im, doin’ all the work of baggin’ a bunch of weird specimens for the yokels t’ gape at, while he gets all the glory back home!”

Tommy Strike laughed good naturedly.

“You’re all bark and not much bite, Roy. You’re just as glad as I am something’s turned up to relieve the monotony.” He brought out his daytime clothes, singlet and trousers of thin rubberized material and the inevitable broad-soled boots for traversing the treacherous soft spots on Venus’ surface.

“Yeah?” retorted Ransom. “I can tell you one thing this visit’ll turn up, an’ that’s trouble. Sure as you’re born, Tommy, that guy’s comin’ here to get two or three Murris — he hopes! An’ you know what that’ll mean!”

Strike’s eyes clouded. There was truth in Ransom’s remarks. Hunting for the strange little creatures called Murris never had resulted in anything but trouble since the day Sidney Murray co-leader of the first great Venusian exploration party, the Cecil Stanhope — Sidney Murray Expedition, first set eyes upon them.

“Well,” he shrugged, “we can stall until just before he’s ready to leave and have some fun at least. Maybe he’ll listen to reason.”

Ransom snorted in wordless disgust at this fantastic hope.

“Anyhow,” insisted Strike, determined to see the cheerful side, “even if there is any disturbance, it always blows over in a few days. I’m heading for the landing field. They’re just about due.”

Tommy stepped outside into the breathlessly hot blinding mist, thick with the stench of rot and decay. Earthly eyes could not penetrate this eternal shroud for

more than a hundred feet at a time, even when a wind stirred the stuff up to resemble the churning of a weak solution of dirty milk. Strike grimaced and thoughtlessly filled and lit his pipe.

Thirty seconds later the air was filled with the thin screams and bangings of dozens of the fabulous whiz-bang beetles as they hurtled their armored bodies blindly against the metal walls of the station, attracted by the odor of tobacco. Strike flinched and hurriedly doused the pipe. A man couldn't even have the solace of a smoke on this damned planet. His life would be endangered by the terrific speed of those whiz-bangs.

A few steps took him to the safety of the rear of the station, where abandoned calcium carbonate tanks loomed like metal giants in the fog. There was a time when it had been necessary to pump the stuff to the miniature spaceport a safe distance away whenever a ship was about to land.

There, sprayed forth from thousands of tiny nozzles high into the air, its tremendous affinity for water carved a clear vertical tunnel in the fog for the approaching spaceship pilot. New telescopic developments, however, rendered the device obsolete.

Strike paced deliberately along the trail that paralleled the ancient pipeline — Earthlings soon learn not to overexert in that atmosphere — and before he had covered half of it his quick ears caught the shrill whine of a spacecraft plunging recklessly into the Venusian air-envelope.

It rose to a nerve-rasping pitch, then dropped sharply away to silence. Presently, sounding curiously muffled and distorted through the clouds, came the noise of opening ports, the clang of metal upon metal, voices. Gerry Carlyle and company had arrived.

He increased his pace somewhat and shortly entered the clearing that served as spaceport. He paused to let amazed eyes roam over the unaccustomed sight. Gerry Carlyle's famous expeditionary ship was an incredible monster of gleaming metal, occupying almost the entire field, towering into the air further than the eye could reach in that atmosphere. Its green glass portholes were glowing weirdly from the ship's lights as they looked down upon the stranger.

The craft was immense, approaching in size the giant clipper ships that traveled to the furthest reaches of the System. Strike had never before been so close

to a ship of such proportions. He smiled at the sight of the name on her bow — The Ark.

The Ark, of course, was one of the new centrifugal flyers, containing in her stem a centrifuge of unbelievable power with millions of tiny rotors running in blasts of compressed air, generating sufficient energy to hurl the ship through space at tremendous speeds. The equipment of The Ark, too, was the talk of the System.

Carlyle, backed by the resources of the Interplanetary Zoo, had turned the ship into a floating laboratory, with a compartment for the captured specimens arranged to duplicate exactly the life conditions of their native planets. All the newer scientific inventions were included in her operating apparatus — the paralysis ray, antigravity, electronic telescope, a dozen other things the trader knew by name only.

His musings were interrupted by the approach of a snappily uniformed man who saluted, smiling.

“Are you Mr. Strike?” he asked. “I’m sub-pilot Barrows of The Ark and very glad to meet you. Gerry Carlyle will see you at once. We’re anxious to get to work immediately.”

This day was to be one of many surprises for Tommy Strike and perhaps the greatest shock of all came when he stood beside the sloping runway leading into the brightly lighted bow of the ship. For, awaiting him there, one hand outstretched and a cool little smile on her lips, stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

“Mr. Strike said Barrows, “this is Miss Gerry Carlyle.”

The trader stared, thunderstruck. In those days of advanced plastic surgery, feminine beauty wasn’t rare but even Strike’s unpracticed eye knew that here was the real thing. No synthetic blonde baby-doll here but a natural beauty untouched by the surgeon’s knife-spun-gold hair, intelligence lighting dark eyes, a hint of passion and temper in the curve of mouth and arch of nostrils. In short, a woman.

But Miss Carlyle’s voice was an ice-water jet to remind the trader of earthside manners.

“You don’t seem enthusiastic over meeting your temporary employer, Mr. Strike. Something wrong about me?”

Strike flushed, angry at himself and his own embarrassment. “Oh oh, no.” He fumbled for words. “That is, I’m surprised that you’re a woman. I — we expected to find a man in-well, in your position. It’s more like a man’s job.”

Sub-pilot Barrows could have warned the trader that this was a touchy point with Gerry Carlyle but he had no chance. The young woman drew herself up and spoke coldly.

“There isn’t a man in the business who has done nearly as well as I. Name a half-dozen hunters. Rogers, Camden, Potter — they aren’t in the same class with me. Man’s job? I think you needn’t worry about me, Mr. Strike. You’ll find I’m man enough to face anything this planet has to offer.”

Strike’s eyebrow twitched. An arrogant female, withal. Terrific sense of her own importance, willful, selfish. He decided he didn’t like her and rather hoped she had come looking for Murriss. If so, she would learn one or two bitter lessons.

There followed a five-minute interlude of scurrying about and shouting and unloading, all done to the tune of Gerry Carlyle’s voice, which could crack like a whiplash when issuing commands.

Then Strike found himself leading a small party back to the trading post. Now surprisingly Miss Carlyle showed a flattering attention to him.

First she wished to know about the business of the trading post.

“It isn’t very exciting,” its proprietor told her. “Mostly we sit around being bored stiff, playing cards or fiddling with the bum radio. Several times during a Venusian day our natives bring in a load of some of the medicinal plants we want. Occasion a rough gem of one kind or another, though Venus is very poor in minerals. The only stone really worth much to be found here is the emerald.”

“Surely there isn’t enough profit in medicinal plants, considering transportation costs, to persuade a young man like you to bury himself here.” She waved her hand around disparagingly.

“There’s profit all right.” Strike shrugged. “The drugs distilled from some of the

Venusian growths are plenty valuable. And then there's the adventure angle." He smiled wryly.

"Plenty of young bucks are willing to sign a three-year contract for the thrills of living on Venus — if they don't know a thing about it beforehand. But it does take an awful lot of stuff to bring a freighter our way. We seldom see a ship more often than three or four Earth-months apart!"

"What in the world — or in Venus are those?" She directed his attention to the thousands of fungi now springing up through moist soil with almost visible movement. They were shaped somewhat like the human body and so pale that they might be a host of tiny corpses rising from their graves.

The trader grimaced. He had never liked those things. Reminded him constantly that battle and destruction were watchwords in this hellhole, where the fang of every creature was turned upon its neighbor and even the plants had poison thorns while the flowers gave off noxious gases to snare the unwary.

"Fungi mostly," he answered. "They grow and propagate amazingly fast. Many of the smaller lifeforms here exist on a single day — they are born, live and die in one hundred seventy hours. Naturally their life cycle is speeded up. In hours all these puffballs will begin popping at once to spread their spores around. It's a funny sight. During the long night, of course, the spores lie dormant. And most of the larger creatures hibernate from the intense cold. Our night life up here is nil. This is strictly a nine-o'clock planet."

She sniffed noting what all newcomers to Venus learn. Although the view is a drab almost colorless one, an incredible multiplicity of odors assails the nostrils — sweet, sharp, musklike, pungent, spicy, with many unfamiliar olfactory sensations to boot.

Strike explained. On Earth flowering plants are fertilized by the passage of insects from one bloom to another, they develop petals of vivid colors to attract bees and butterflies and other insects. But on Venus, where perpetual mist renders impotent any appeal to sight, plants have adapted themselves to appeal to the sense of smell, therefore give off all sorts of enticing odors.

So it went, question and answer, the pleasant business of getting acquainted, until the all-too-short walk to the station was over. But Strike was not deceived by the woman's sudden change of attitude.

He knew that an interplanetary hunter of Gerry Carlyle's experience would certainly have read up on Venus before ever coming there. And he suspected she knew the answers already to every question she asked.

She must have noticed Strike's disapproving eyebrow during the first moments of their meeting and had deliberately set out to ingratiate herself to promote harmony during her brief stay on the cloudy planet. The trader was willing to be friendly but he looked upon the woman with caution and distaste. Her aggressiveness was not to his taste.

Chapter II. The Huntress

Gerry Carlyle was decidedly a woman of action.

"No time to waste," she declared incisively as they reached the post. "Earth and Venus are nearing conjunction and I want to be ready to take off as soon after that date as possible. I've no wish to bang around in space waiting for Earth to catch up to us with a cargo of weird specimens raising Hades in the hold. If you've no objections, Mr. Strike, we'll make our first foray at once."

Strike nodded, staring at this disturbing young woman, who could be one instant so warm and friendly, the next imperious and dominating.

"Sure," he agreed. "Be with you in a moment."

He ran up the metal stairway to where Roy Ransom's face hung over the porch rail like an amazed bearded balloon and the two vanished into the house. Strike returned shortly with a tiny two-way radio.

"Ransom sends out a radio beam for us to travel on. I tell him which way to turn it in case we deviate from a straight line. It's the only possible way to cover any distance in this murk." He adjusted a single earphone, slipped receiver and broadcaster unit into a capacious pocket.

Next he insisted on painting the insides of everyone's nostrils with a tarry aromatic substance.

"Germ-killer," he smiled. "For each dangerous animal on this planet there are a hundred vicious bacteria to knock off an Earthman in twenty hours. I guess that finishes the preliminaries. Shall we go? I ought to warn you that the sense of

hearing is well developed up here, so it'll help if you move as quietly as possible."

"One moment." Gerry Carlyle's cool voice struck in abruptly. "I want two things thoroughly understood. First, I'm the sole leader of this party and what I say goes." She smiled with icy sweetness. "No complaints, of course, Mr. Strike, but it's just as well to forestall future misunderstandings.

"Secondly, you must know that the main object of this expedition is to catch one or more Murris and return with them alive. We'll take a number of other interesting specimens, of course, but the Murri is our real goal."

She looked around challengingly, as if expecting a dissenting reaction. And she was not disappointed. Strike glanced up at the porch to exchange a significant look with Ransom.

When he smiled wryly, Gerry Carlyle's temper flared.

"What is the mystery about this Murri, anyhow? Everywhere I go, on Venus, back on Earth among members of my own profession, if the word Murri is mentioned everyone scowls and tries to change the subject. Why?"

No one answered. The Carlyle party shifted uneasily, their boots making shucking sounds. Presently Strike offered, "The fact is, you'll never take back a Murri alive. But you wouldn't believe me if I told you the reason, Miss Carlyle. I ___"

"Why not? What's the matter with them? Is their presence fatal to a human in some way?"

"Oh. no."

"Are they so rare or so shy they can't be found?"

"No, I think I can find you some before you take off."

"Then are they so delicate they can't stand the trip? If so, I can tell you we've done everything to make hold number three an exact duplicate of living conditions here:'

“No, it isn’t that either,” the trader sighed.

“Then what is it?” she cried. “Why all the evasions and secretive looks? You’re acting just like Hank Rogers when I caught him one day in the Explorers’ Club.

“He came up here awhile back to get a good Murri specimen. But he returned empty-handed. I asked him why, and he refused to tell me. Actually acted embarrassed about something. What’s it all about?”

Tommy Strike shook his head firmly.

“It can’t be explained, Miss Carlyle. It’s just something you’ll find out for yourself.”

And on that note of dissatisfaction the party struck off through the mist. The half-dozen crew members from The Ark were surprised to find the going comparatively easy.

Although the great amount of water on Venus would presuppose profuse jungle growth, there is insufficient sunlight to support much more than the tallest varieties of trees, which shoot hundreds of feet up into the curtain of the mist, their broad-bladed leaves spread wide to treasure every stray sunbeam that filters through.

Undergrowth — which is confined to a sprawling, cactuslike shrub with poisonous spines and to a great many species of drably flowering plants with innumerable odors and perfume — is laid out almost geometrically in order to catch the dilute sunshine without interference from the occasional Ion trees.

“The main danger in travel,” as Strike explained, “is in losing the radio beam. Sometimes we have to circle a bog and we’ve got to be pretty careful not to let the signal fade.”

The party, with Strike and Gerry Carlyle in the lead, hadn’t been five minutes away from the station when the restless quiet was shattered by a terrific grunting and coughing like that of a thousand hogs at feeding time. The noise was intermittent, rumbling for a few seconds somewhere ahead, then stopping abruptly to be succeeded by slopping and smacking sounds.

The entire party paused for an instant at that blast of strange thunder. Startled by

the sound out of nowhere.

The trader grinned. “Shovelmouth,” he explained. “Not very dangerous.”

Gerry Carlyle glanced at her guide catching his implication. “We prefer ‘em dangerous, as a matter of fact. Though I hardly expected to find anything interesting this close to-er-civilization.”

Strike grinned at the thrust and a little prickle of excitement crawled up his spine as he watched the Carlyle party slip into their smooth routine. Her crisp commands detailed one man to remain with the bulky equipment. Two more loaded a pair of cathode-bolt guns, baby cannons beside the pistol the trader carried for emergencies.

Two of the others, including Gerry, selected weapons resembling the old-fashioned rifles-now to be seen only in museums. Barrows was to work the camera.

“Allen,” Gerry snapped, “you circle around to the left. Kranz to the right. As usual, hold your fire unless it’s absolutely necessary to prevent the specimen’s escape. We’ll give you three minutes to get into position.”

The two flankers were already moving off into the mist when Strike woke up.

“Wait!” he cracked out. “Come back here. No one must get out of visual touch with me! It’s too easy to get permanently lost. Sounds carry far, naturally, but it’s impossible for an untrained ear to tell which direction they’re coming from in this fog.”

Gerry Carlyle’s eyes flashed in momentary anger as her commands were countermanded but the plan of action was amended to permit the two flankers to remain within sight of the main body.

Strike had thought that Miss Carlyle’s assistants were rather a colorless lot, stooges automatically going through letter-perfect roles, and wondered if they’d be any good if they found themselves suddenly without a leader. But when the party spread out with military precision for the stalk Tommy Strike had to admit to himself that he had never witnessed a more competent movement.

Not a single unnatural sound broke the quiet. Not a stick snapped, not a fungus

squelched beneath an incautious heel. Even the sucking noises from marshy spots were missing. In sixty seconds they slipped into a little clearing and stood gazing with professional curiosity at the doomed shovelmouth.

The creature was worth a second look. Fifty feet long and nearly twenty feet wide, it had three pairs of squat powerful legs ending in enormously spatulate discs. Its hide was a thick, tough gray stuff that gleamed dully with a wet slickness in the half light.

But the most surprising feature was the creature's head which, instead of tapering to a point, broadened into a mammoth snout extending several feet horizontally from mouth-corner to mouth-corner. Flattened against the ground it had a ludicrous similarity to a fan-tail vacuum cleaner attachment.

The shovelmouth stared at the party disinterestedly out of muddy eyes, then lowered his head and waddled across the clearing. Its mouth plowed up a wide shallow furrow as it ate indiscriminately the numerous fungi, lowlying bushes, sticks and mud.

"Herbivorous," Strike murmured. "Its main article of diet is fungus growths but it takes so much for a meal that the creature has to spend most of its waking hours eating everything it can get its mouth on."

Evidently the animal had been dining for some time, for the clearing looked as if a drunken farmer had been trying to plow it up. Gerry signaled, and her crew moved into position like soldiers. She slipped up on the creature's blind side and aimed her curious rifle at the soft, inner portion of the shovelmouth's leg.

Plop! The beast jerked, nipped at the wound momentarily, then continued to feed. Twenty seconds later it reeled dizzily about and fell to the ground, unconscious.

Just like that — simple, efficient, no fuss at all. Tommy Strike felt a sense of anticlimax.

"What a disappointment," he said ruefully. "I expected a terrific battle and a lot of excitement with maybe one or two of us half killed for the sake of the movies!"

"With Mr. Strike heroically rescuing Gerry Carlyle from the jaws of death?" She

smiled as the trader winced. “Sorry, but this is a business, Mr. Strike, and I find it pays to play safe and sane and preserve my crew intact.”

“I value them too much to risk their lives for the sake of a bunch of cheap thrill seekers back home. No. We have excitement and adventure only when someone makes a mistake. Carlyle parties make a minimum of mistakes.”

That was the arrogant and cocksure Gerry Carlyle speaking and Strike did not try to dispute her. “I suppose you used a sort of hypodermic bullet in that rifle of yours. But I thought you’d be using more scientific weapons than that. It seems sort of — sort of primitive.”

Gerry smiled.

“I know. You’re wondering about the anesthetic gases. Or the wonderful new paralysis ray. Well, there’re a lot of inventions that work fine under controlled lab conditions that are flops in the field.

“The paralysis ray is just a toy, totally impracticable. It’s unreliable because each species of animal requires a different amount of the ray to subdue him and we seldom have time to fool around experimenting in my work.

“It may also prove fatal if the victim gets too much of a jolt. As for knockout gas, it necessitates the hunters wearing masks and it is difficult to control in the proper dosages between unconsciousness and death.”

Strike nodded understanding and turned to be surprised by the activity behind him. While he and the woman talked, the party had prepared the motionless shovelmouth for transportation back to The Ark. Broad bands of bluish metal had been fastened around legs and neck and the crew had even managed to slide two or three underneath the huge body and encircle it.

Wires led from each piece of metal to a common source, a compact boxlike affair vaguely resembling a battery case with two dials on its face. A throw of a switch energized the metal and gradually the mighty bulk of the shovelmouth rose from the ground. It hung in the air, suspended like a grotesque toy balloon. To tow it back to the ship would be a simple matter.

“Antigravity,” explained Gerry. “We give the metal bands a gravity charge of slightly more than one. Like repelling magnetic charges, they rise from the

ground and carry the animal with them.”

The equipment-bearer simply lashed a rope round his waist to pull the shovelmouth along behind and the party resumed the hunt.

“I think,” said Gerry Carlyle, “that we’re too likely to bump into something without warning in this mist. If you’ll bring out the electronic telescope, Mr. Barrows —”

Barrows at once produced one of the most interesting gadgets that Strike had yet seen, a portable model of the apparatus used on all the modern centrifugal flyers. It consisted of a power unit carried by one of the men, and a long glass tube to be carried by the observer.

The front of it presented a convex surface covered with photoelectric material, to capture the electron streams of all kinds of light, from ultraviolet to infra-red.

As the light particles entered the tube, they passed through a series of three electrostatic fields for focusing, and then through another field for magnification. At the rear of the tube they struck a fluorescent screen and reproduced the image. Looking through the baby telescope gave the impression of gazing down a tunnel in the mist for as far as the eye could reach.

By keeping in constant touch with Ransom at the post, who kept the beam moving slowly around like the spoke of a wheel, Strike enabled the party to move laterally.

Through the telescope they picked up many of the smaller and shyer lifeforms not ordinarily seen — lizards, crawling shapes, crablike forms, even two or three of the scaly man-things native to Venus, slithering silently through the fog with sulky expressions on their not-too-intelligent fishlike faces.

Strike and Gerry became so interested in watching this teeming life through the ‘scope that they walked into real danger.

Without warning a rushing sound filled the air at their left, and a round gray ball rolled swiftly into view. It crossed their path dead ahead — propelling itself with dozens of stout cilia sprouting indiscriminately from all sides — then paused abruptly.

The miniature forest of arms waved delicately and exploringly in the air as if trying to locate the source of a new disturbance. Then the fantastic thing rushed unerringly at the Carlyle party.

All the hunters leaped for cover and let the juggernaut roll past. It stopped a few yards beyond with another waving of cilia, as if listening intently. Gerry pumped a hypodermic bullet at it, but the charge ripped glancingly off the armourlike lorica.

“Rotifer,” said Strike shortly. “Something like the tiny animalcules back on Earth, magnified many times and adapted for land travel. Venus is largely aqueous and was even more so at one time. Much of its terrestrial life developed from lifeforms originally dwelling in the water —”

He stepped aside again casually as the rotifer rumbled by. “They have their uses, though. That half-hidden mouth of theirs takes in everything it contacts. They’re the scavengers of this planet. We call ‘em Venusian buzzards.”

The party scattered for a third time as the blind devourer sought to catch them once more. Barrows looked appealingly at his leader.

“They may have their uses,” admitted the sub-pilot, “but this baby’ll be a nuisance if we have to spend the rest of the trip dodging him.”

There was truth in that, so the rotifer was dispatched with a cathode bolt. But as they crowded around to examine this curious bit of protoplasmic phenomena, a shrill scream as shocking as the shriek of a wounded horse tore through from the upper air. They swiveled about to gaze upon the most terrifying of all products of Venusian vertebrate evolution.

Fully fifty feet the monster towered into the mist, standing upright on two massive legs reminiscent of the extinct terrestrial Tyrannosaurus rex. A set of short forelegs were equipped with hideously lethal claws. The head was long and narrow resembling a wolf’s snout, with large ears and slavering fangs.

Everything about the nightmare creature was constructed for efficient annihilation, particularly of those animals who mistakenly sought safety in the tops of the tall trees.

“A whip!” yelled Strike, turning to the cathode-gun carriers, sudden

apprehension stabbing him deep. “It’s a whip! Let him have it, quick!”

The crew looked uncertainly to Gerry Carlyle, who promptly countermanded the order.

“Not so fast. I want this one alive. They’ve nothing like him in London.”

She flipped up her rifle, fired at a likely spot. Strike groaned as the monstrous whip squealed shrilly again and again, staring down at the tiny Earthlings from fiery eyes.

Then from that wolfish snout uncurled an amazing fifty-foot length of razor-edged tongue, like that of a terran anteater. Straight at Gerry Carlyle it lashed out, cracking sharply. Strike’s rush caught her from behind sprawling her on the spongy earth.

“Curl up in a ball,” he yelled in her ear, “so it can’t get any purchase with that tongue!”

Gerry obeyed and Strike turned to warn the others as the whip swished over her ducking head.

“Scatter!” he cried. “Don’t —”

But too late. That coiling sweep of flesh rope struck Barrows glancingly across the head, shearing off the lobe of one ear. Blood spurted as the sub-pilot staggered away, one hand to his face.

The rest of the bearers darted alertly away in all directions, seeking the shelter of the fog. But the man who was burdened with the heavy equipment paused momentarily to shed himself of it. It cost him his life. Straight and sure that incredible tongue snaked out to wind itself around the man’s twisting form. Instantly he shot into the air toward the gaping fanged jaws.

The fellow struggled, screaming. In vain. One arm was pinioned. He hadn’t a chance to defend himself. Before his surprised companions could bring their guns to bear on the whip, there was a swift crunch, a hideous splattering of crimson stuff bright and horrible against the drab background, and it was all over. The expeditionary force was reduced by one.

All possibility of rescue being gone, the reserve gunners lowered their deadly guns and allowed the hunters to go about the job of subduing the monster.

Little snapping reports sounded in rapid succession — three, four, five.

And presently the whip reeled like a tower in an earthquake. It swayed. A few wavering steps described a short half circle. Then quietly it flopped awkwardly down and passed into insensibility.

Strike stood upright and pulled Gerry to her feet. He wiped cold sweat from his brow.

“Whew! That was too close for comfort!”

The woman brushed herself off and stared the trader in the eye. “Hereafter, Mr. Strike, please remember that in a real emergency such as this, one of our cardinal rules is every man for himself. The principle of throwing away two lives in a futile effort to save one is not encouraged among us. No more heroics, if you please!”

Strike’s face flamed. No one likes to be bawled out when he’s expecting warm gratitude. But even more Strike was angry at the apparent callousness.

“Then you don’t think much of your assistants,” he snapped, looking significantly at the bloody muzzle of the whip.

No emotion disturbed the serenity of her face.

“On the contrary. I regret Blair’s passing very much. He was a well-trained and valuable man. But he can be replaced.”

“Good God, woman!” cried Strike. “Haven’t you any feelings. A friend of yours has just been done to death horribly on an alien planet, far from his home and family. And you — ” He stopped, suddenly ashamed of his outburst of sentiment.

Gerry said simply, “We never sign on family men.”

Then she turned her back on Strike and snapped orders to prepare the whip for transportation back to The Ark. But in the last tiny instant as she turned away

Strike glimpsed something in her eye which provided him with sudden and complete revelation.

It explained at once the reason for Gerry Carlyle's shell of impersonal reserve and callousness. She was a woman walking in a man's world, speaking man's language, using man's tools.

As a constant companion of men she had to train herself to live their life, meet them on their own terms. To command their respect she felt she had no right to use the natural endowments of charm and beauty which nature had given her.

Indeed, she dared not use them, for fear of the consequences. To give way to feminine emotion would be, she feared, to lose her domination over her male subordinates. She was, in short, that most beleaguered of beings — a woman who dared not let herself be a woman.

All this Tommy Strike guessed and his feelings toward Gerry Carlyle began to change from dislike to pity and perhaps to something warmer. For he was certain he had seen real tears unshed.

Chapter III. The Murris

The succeeding days passed swiftly as specimen after weird specimen was subdued and carried to the rapidly filling hold of The Ark.

Strike's only worry was the ever-approaching hour when he must produce a Murri or face Gerry's wrath. And although he knew it was coming, still the demand arrived too suddenly for him on the morning of the sixth day.

"Mr. Strike." Not once had the young woman dropped her shield of formality. "I've been pretty patient with your repeated sidetracking of my request for a Murri. But our visit here is almost over. We leave in forty-eight hours. To remain grounded during a Venusian night would mean a tiresome and dangerous journey home. Come on — no more stalling."

Strike looked at her. "What if I refuse?"

Gerry smiled glacially. "Your company would hear about it at once. You were ordered to assist us in every way, you know."

The trader nodded, shrugged.

“All right. Just a second while I —”

The rest of his sentence was lost in a clatter of footsteps as Ransom came down the metal stairs with a curious piece of apparatus in his hands.

“Thought you’d be needing this, Tommy,” he said significantly with a disgusted glance at Gerry.

“Yeah, I sure do.” Strike fitted the contrivance to his body by shoulder straps.

“Now what?” Gerry wanted to know. “Do you need special equipment to find a Murri? What’s that contraption for, anyhow?”

Strike was willing to explain.

“The power unit of this ‘contraption’ consists of a vacuum tube oscillator and amplifier and the receiver unit of an inductance bridge and vacuum-tube amplifier. There’s also a set of headphones” — he held them up in classroom style — ” and an exploring coil.

“The bridge is energized by a sinusoidal current, brought to balance by appropriate resistance and inductance controls. If a conductive body comes within the artificially created magnetic field of the coil, eddy currents set up in the conductive mass will reduce the effective inductance of the exploring coil, serving to unbalance the bridge. This condition is indicated in the headphones —”

“Stop! Stop!” Gerry covered her ears with her hands. “I know an ore-finding doodle-bug when I see one! I just wanted to know why you’re carrying it with you now.”

“Oh, for protection.”

“Protection against what?”

“The natives.”

Gerry stared. “Natives. Those scaly, fish-faced things that skulk around just out

of sight in the fog? Why, those timid little creatures wouldn't hurt us — they couldn't. Besides, how'll your doodle-bug protect us against them?"

"Why, they're very clever at hiding in the mist and this metal indicator will reveal their presence if they get too close. You see, all the natives in this sector wear gold teeth!"

Someone tittered and Gerry flushed. "If you please, Mr. Strike, let's stick to business and keep the conversation on an intellectual plane. A good joke has its place but —"

"That's no joke," Strike said with a touch of bitterness. "It's a fact. Ever since Murray made his first trip to Venus the natives have gone for gold teeth in a big way. They took Murray for a god, you know, and emulated him in many ways.

"He had several gold teeth, relics of childhood dentistry, so the natives promptly scraped up some of the cheaply impure gold that's found around here and made caps for their teeth. As for their not hurting us, Miss Carlyle, that remains to be seen.

"It has always meant trouble when one of you animal-catchers tries to mess around with the Murris. You'll understand me better in a few minutes." He shrugged and twitched his eyebrows. "I'm just being prepared."

"Rats! Mystery, generalities, trouble — but no explanations. Your evasive hints of reasons not to touch the Murris just fascinate me all the more. I wouldn't drop the hunt now for all the radium on Callisto!"

"All right," Strike capitulated curtly. "Let's go." He struck off straight through the mist as if knowing exactly where he meant to go. In five minutes he halted before a mighty cycad peppered with twelve-inch holes which housed a colony of at least fifty of the famous Murris.

"There you are," said Strike with resignation. "Pseudo-simia Murri."

Gerry completely forgot to be indignant at Strike's holdout. She was swept away in a gale of merriment that overcame the party at sight of the strange creatures.

Perhaps half of the colony was in constant motion, scrambling round and round the huge bole of the tree, up and down, popping in and out of their holes out

along the mighty frondlike branches and back frantically. The others simply sat watching in solemn indifference, occasionally opening their pouting lips to ask sorrowfully — “Murri? Murri? Murri?”

They were well named. Though soft and grayish-brown, with scanty hair growth on their backs, their size and antics did resemble terrestrial simians. With their tremendous nasal development, they looked much like the Proboscis monkey.

And this very de Bergerac beak of a nose made their name even more appropriate, for Sidney Murray, Stanhope’s co-explorer, was famous throughout the System for having the hugest and ugliest nose extant.

The Pseudo-simia Murri colony presented to the eyes of the fascinated watchers a hundred facial replicas of Sidney Murray, spinning and dancing fantastically around the tree.

“Oh!” gasped Gerry finally, wiping laughter’s tears from her cheeks. “Oh, but this is wonderful! Who-who named them?”

Strike looked solemnly at her. “Murray himself named ‘em. He has quite a sense of humor.”

“Sense of humor! Oh, it’s colossal!” She took a deep breath. “What a sensation a dozen of these cute little butterballs will make in London. What a prize!”

“You haven’t got them in London yet,” Strike pointed out, keeping one uneasy eye on the indicator of his “doodle-bug.”

“If you think anything’s going to stop me now you don’t yet know Gerry Carlyle.” Again she was the arrogant, self-willed expedition commander.

They moved up to the cycad and examined the Murriss at close quarters. They were quite tame. The close inspection revealed three facts of interest.

The first was the presence of short, prehensile tail equipped with a vicious-appearing sting near the tip. “Only a weak defensive mechanism,” Strike explained, “a Murriss live almost exclusively on the datelike fruits of the tree they live in. The sting’s no worse than a bee sting.” He extended one knotty forearm, showing a small pockmark where he had once been stung.

The second was the large brown eyes possessed by the Murri which stared at the intruders unblinkingly with a heart-wringing hypnotic expression of sorrow. “They look as if they’d seen all the trouble and woe in the Universe,” Barrows said. “Makes me feel like a louse to take them away from their home!”

The third was a heap of strangely incongruous junk piled at the base of the big tree. There were cheap clocks, gewgaws, matches, children’s fireworks, odds and ends. “Offerings by the natives,” explained Strike. “That’s the legal tender up here. Medicinal weeds and rough gems in exchange for those things.” He gestured at the pile of trash. “Anything fire-producing is especially valuable. The Murri is the natives’ god — because of his resemblance to Sidney Murray, the First God.”

There was more laughter, but subdued this time as the party realized that removing one or more Murris would be to commit Venusian sacrilege.

“I see now what you meant by ‘causing trouble,’” Gerry said. “But it can’t be too much for you to handle. It’s happened before, I assume, and always blew over. These primitives — if that’s your only reason for dissuading us to capture a few —”

“That’s not the only reason.” But Strike would explain no further.

“More mystery!” Gerry snorted and supervised the set-up of a big net under one of the longer overhanging branches.

Then two well-directed shots snapped the limb and catapulted a half dozen astonished Murris into the net. With incredible agility most of them bounced into the air and scrambled to safety. But one was caught in the tricky meshes. The ends of the net were quickly folded together to form a bag.

“Got him!” exulted Gerry. “Why, that was easy!”

“Sure. But he isn’t in London Zoo yet nor even back to the ship.”

Gerry gave Strike a withering look, then peered into the net. The Murri lay quiescent, staring up with enormously round-eyed amazement.

“Murri-murri-murri?”

Gerry laughed again at this fantastic miniature of the great Murray, mumbling earnestly to himself. "Back to The Ark, boys," she cried. "We'll have a lot of fun with this little dickens!"

The party turned to retrace its steps and then trouble broke out for fair. When the Murri had been removed about ten yards from its home tree a violent fit of trembling seized him. He screamed shrilly two or three times and from the Murri tree came a hideous shrieking clamor in response.

The little captive burst into a flurry of wild activity, struggling with unbelievable fury to escape. He twisted, clawed, spat, bit. As the carriers bore him inevitably further away from his home he seemed to go absolutely mad, stinging himself repeatedly with barbed tail in an outburst of insane terror.

After a series of heart-rending cries of despair he gave a final frenzied outburst that ended with a gout of pale straw-colored blood from his mouth.

The entire party stopped to stare appalled at the little creature. Gerry Carlyle's shell of reserve was punctured. She looked badly shaken. It was some moments before she could force herself to open the net and examine the quiet little body.

"Dead," she pronounced though everyone knew it. "Internal hemorrhage. Burst a blood vessel."

Strike answered her bewildered glance with melancholy triumph.

"Agoraphobia. Murris are the most pronounced agoraphobes in the System. They spend their whole lives on and around the particular tree in which they're born. Take 'em a few yards away and they have a nervous breakdown ending in convulsion and death."

He indicated the dead body in the net. "I could have told you but you wouldn't have believed me. You'd have come to find out for yourself anyhow."

Gerry shook herself like a fluffy dog that has just received an unexpected ice-water shower.

"So that's what you meant when you said I'd never bring one back alive, is it?"

"Partly."

“Partly! You mean there’s something else queer about these —”

Strike nodded gloomily. “You’ll find out before long. I know what you’re going to do. Capture another. Cut off his tail so he can’t sting himself. Tie him up like a Christmas package so he can’t move hand or foot. Anything to keep him from killing himself by struggling. Right?”

“Right!” Gerry determined.

“Rogers tried all that when he was here, yet he failed.”

“And so?”

The trader shrugged. “So you’ll fail, too. But don’t let me stop —”

“You won’t stop me, Mr. Strike. Don’t ever think it.”

Together with Kranz, the woman rigged up two makeshift straight jackets to hold the captive Murriss rigidly unmoving. Meanwhile, the other hunters spread the big net again and shot down another branch full of the curious Murriss. The healthiest pair were quickly strapped up tightly and the party left to the accompaniment of a terrific yapping and hissing and yammering from the survivors of the colony.

Strike and Ransom spent the remainder of the lingering Venusian day resting from their exertions. Activity in that vicious climate quickly sapped the most rugged strength and Strike particularly felt that he had been drained of all energy.

As the light imperceptibly faded Ransom suggested, “I guess The Ark will be leaving soon. Now’s the best time for ‘em to take off. Conjunction.”

Strike shook his head.

“No. That tough little Carlyle is over there in her ship learning a mighty bitter lesson. She won’t leave now. She won’t leave for some time,” he predicted. “Wait and see.”

But only to himself did he admit that he wanted badly to see that incredible woman again.

Chapter IV. The Stolen Shrine

Strike was right. As the absolute darkness of Venusian night dragged its black cloak over the trading post light footsteps ran up the stairs outside. Knuckles beat on the metal door which Ransom opened. Gerry Carlyle pushed in.

“Mr. Strike,” she said and there was a worried crease between her eyes, “neither of the Murris will eat. We can’t force anything down their throats. And if we free them they immediately have one of those terrible fits!”

The trader shrugged. “So why come to me?”

“Can’t you suggest anything to do? They’ll starve themselves to death. And dead Murris have no market value. I’ve sworn I wouldn’t return without at least one healthy Murri, so you’ve got to help me!”

“Nobody can do anything. You’ll never take them back alive. I told you that before. Presently you’ll believe it. If there’s any mercy in you you’ll return those two to their home while they’re well.”

Gerry’s eyes flashed blue fire.

“I’m trying to be merciful without compromising my conscience. If humanly possible I’m taking those Murris home alive. Now — if you’ll only help — we’re going to try feeding through a stomach tube. If that fails, with injections. I thought you’d be able to help us in the food selection.”

“It’s hopeless. Rogers tried that too. When you take a Murri away from its home he undergoes such a nervous shock that his metabolism goes haywire. He just can’t assimilate anything.”

Gerry went away furious but was back within twenty-four hours. She was beginning to show the strain. Her hair was awry, her eyes blood-shot from lack of sleep.

“Strike,” she begged, “can’t you suggest anything? They’re growing thinner by the hour. You can see them waste away. If you’ve been holding something back just to-to discipline me I’ll say, ‘Uncle.’ Only please —”

Strike seized the chance to turn the knife in the wound.

“You flatter yourself if you think I’d sacrifice even a couple of Murris for the sake of softening you a little.”

But the thrust missed its mark. Gerry was lost within herself, absorbed in her battle to bend two insignificant caricatures to her will. “Drat them!” she flared. “They’re doing this to spite me. But I’ll make them live. I’ll make them live!”

Forty-eight hours later she was back again, banging frantically to Strike’s sturdy arm. The Murri silent martyrdom had broken her completely. She was a nervous wreck.

“Tommy,” she wailed. “I can’t stand it any longer. They just sit there, so helpless, so frail, without a sound, and stare at me. Those pathetic brown eyes follow me wherever I go.

“They-they’re mesmerizing me. I see them in darkness — I see them in my dreams when I manage to get to sleep. It’s pitiful — and horrible. Even the crew goes around now with silent accusation in their faces. I can’t stand it.”

Strike’s heart went out to this bewildered woman.

“You see now why Rogers and the others wouldn’t talk about their experience with the Murris? Why I said you wouldn’t believe me even if I told you?”

“Yes. I understand. Rogers was ashamed to admit what he thought was a weakness. Embarrassed to have anyone think a funny little Venusian monkey could soften him up by just staring at him with those hypnotic brown eyes.

“I-I sent the boys out to find that tree and dig it up whole, Murris and all to transport back to earth. I thought that might solve the difficulty. But I see now it wouldn’t.”

“What!” Strike roared in sudden apprehension. The fools! Not content with stealing the natives’ local gods, now they intended to desecrate the whole shrine! “Out there in the darkness? It’s suicide!”

The trader leaped for his furs and heating pads, dressing quickly for a sortie into the bitter Venusian night. Gerry looked surprised.

“How do you mean? Are they in danger?”

“The natives have brought nothing here for trading in the last seventy hours,” he returned grimly. “That means trouble. Plenty!”

“But surely they’re not out at night! The temperatures!”

“Doesn’t affect them. They evolved from an aqueous lifeform and like it cold. Fewer natural dangers for them at night too.”

He strapped on the gold-detector and radio receiver, strode for the door. “You stay here. Roy! Get the beam working!” He seized a light and barged out.

Gerry’s mouth thinned out as she slipped her fur cape over her head and determinedly followed Strike down the stairway. There was a brief argument ending with the trader’s angry capitulation.

“We can’t debate it now. At least make yourself useful. Carry this.” He handed her the powerful searchlight and they moved off together.

A new world was revealed in the gleaming swath of the light, everything covered with a thick frost, utterly lifeless and still. Each breath was a chill knife in their lungs. In the intense quiet they heard the faint sounds of the work party hard at the task of removing the Murri tree.

A quick run brought them to the clearing. Stationary lights made a ring about the workers, who had already fastened antigravity plates to the tree and were loosening the frozen soil. Strike’s voice rang out.

“Stop work, men! Grab your tools and beat it back — ” He paused. The needle on the detectors dial was jerking spasmodically.

“Quick!” yelled Strike. “The natives are close by! Run for it!”

But the work party, blinded by the lights, gaped stupidly about and called out questions. Strike ran at them, shouting furiously, but his words were lost as he witnessed an incredible sight. One by one the members of the digging party were falling, wriggling and twisting amazingly.

One of them thrust his feet straight into the air and made grotesque walking motions. Another dug his face into the dirt trying to walk right down through the earth. The only one remaining upright turned round and round in tight little

circles like a pirouetting ice-skater.

“Good heavens!” cried Gerry unsteadily. “What’s wrong with them?”

Strike seized her about the waist. “Gas! Don’t breathe! The natives get it from one of these devilish Venusian plants. Gets into the nervous system. Localizes in the semi-circular-canals. Destroys the sense of balance!” He started back through the mist toward the station.

But with the third step Strike’s world reeled sickeningly about him. He dropped Gerry, fighting desperately with outstretched arms for balance. The ground heaved beneath him. Wherever he strove to put his feet it seemed successively to be the sky, the perpendicular bole of a tree, nothingness.

His eyes began to throb intolerably. Terrible nausea shook him and he retched violently several times. He thrashed about so wildly in his efforts to stand upright that his equipment was scattered about the clearing, much of it smashed.

Strike forced himself to lie quietly while the visible world rocked like a storm-lashed ship. He was conscious of the frightened yells of the stricken workmen, a rush of feet, the monosyllabic squeaks and rasps of the Venusians, whose gilllike breathing system filtered out all the poisonous elements of the atmosphere.

Then Gerry’s startled scream knifed his consciousness. Just one outcry, no begging for help. But the sounds of her struggle were plain as she was carried away.

Strike sat up. His smarting eyes took in a confused blur of moving figures. The man who had been standing was down now, a literal pin-cushion, bristling with poison-dipped native spears. Already the body was bloating. None of the others, apparently, were injured. Then a horrid vomiting welled up in Strike’s throat, and he rolled over to be sick again.

But Strike, on the extreme edge of the clearing, had inhaled only a little of the gas. He lay with his face close to the frozen earth, breathing cautiously, testing every lungful for tell-tale odors, then exhaling vigorously.

Gradually the earth slowed its spinning as the stuff worked off. Strike became conscious of a splitting headache as if every nerve-end in his skull were raw and throbbing. But as he took in the scene before him all thought of his own

discomfort vanished in a wave of horror. The natives were out for revenge and Gerry Carlyle was their intended victim!

Strike had underestimated the natives' intelligence. Smarter than he thought, they had recognized somehow in the antigravity plates fastened to the tree trunk the greatest threat to the Murriss. Further, their sluggish wits had puzzled out cause and effect and had gone unerringly to the control unit with its deadly switch, ready to unleash its power with the touch of a finger.

Gerry lay in a limp bundle on the ground, jerking now and then. About her slim body were clumsily fixed at least a half dozen of the antigravity plates. And the leader of the Venusians was bending over the switch.

Strike started up in a frenzy, yelling. Rubbery knees promptly sent him to the ground again. Not yet. No strength. He whispered a prayer for something to delay that outstretched native finger hovering over the power unit.

Perhaps he would move it the wrong way and — but Strike went cold all over at the thought. He wasn't sure, but wouldn't that smash Gerry into a bloody pulp, grind her into a shapeless mess?

Strike began to crawl grimly toward the lighted circle and the pile of weapons belonging to the disarmed work party. It was far, too far. He'd never make it. He paused to be sick again, less violently this time. His head was clearing rapidly but too late. He had to delay things somehow.

Strike's hand bumped against his pocket, dipped in and swiftly out again holding his pipe. Still half full of tobacco. He snatched out a lighter and applied the flame, sucking vigorously, fighting the giddiness, blowing great clouds of pungent smoke all about him. The pipe dropped from nerveless fingers and he hunched down in a prayerful attitude, hoping, waiting tensely. Had he failed?

Zin-n-ng! Plock! It worked! Strike ducked and curled up into as small a ball as possible. In a split second the air resounded with the shrill whines of hundreds of the tiny whiz-bang beetles, armor-protected against the cold, as they hurtled in a cloud to the source of their favorite scent.

Few flew low enough to hit Strike and those were glancing blows that simply left red welts across his back. He saw perfectly the entire scene as his unwitting allies, the whiz-bangs, stormed into the clearing.

It was as if someone had loosed a series of shotgun charges at the natives. The leader of the Venusians dropped as if cathoded when several of the armored beetles rifled into his most vulnerable spot, the throat.

The natives set up a hideous thin wailing. They ducked. They flailed about them with vigorous futility. Finally they broke and ran wildly away into the dark, dropping even their weapons.

For awhile the whiz-bangs zoomed back and forth across the clearing but eventually they too vanished as Strike's now buried pipe gave forth no more enticing scents. Presently Strike stood up, brushed himself off and grinned. This was his moment! Like a conquering hero he strode into the clearing to gaze on the devastation wrought.

The workmen were still prone, sensibly waiting for the effects of the gas to wear off. Gerry leaned like an old rag against the tree, staring with dazed eyes at her deliverer. Her fingers trembled so that Strike had to help her unfasten the antigravity plates.

She tried to stand erect but her knees betrayed her and she fell into the trader's ready embrace. He tried to look stern.

"Well, young lady, I trust you've learned two lessons this night. One, that even a Gerry Carlyle can't always have her way — especially with the Murris. Two, that a mere man, even if only to make an occasional unwanted sacrifice, can sometimes come in pretty handy."

Gerry became acutely conscious of her position and she tried to free herself with no great earnestness. Strike laughed. She turned a furious crimson and he laughed at her again.

"Simply a vaso-motor disturbance," she explained frigidly.

"Is that what you call it? I rather like it. I want to see more." Strike kissed her and Gerry's vaso-motor system went completely haywire.

From far up in the invisible branches of the Murri-tree one of its inhabitants, disturbed by the night's hullabaloo, leaned out and inquired sleepily through his nose — "Murri? Murri-murri-murri?"

THE DUAL WORLD

Chapter V. The Lost Continent

The space ship loomed like a mysterious monster in the hot, swirling mists. It lay quiescent on a vast, lonely stretch of hard-packed beach. Immediately westward, barely to be seen in the eternal fog, lay the sluggish gray wastes of the Mare Gigantum, greatest of all the Venusian seas. The Solar tide was creeping in, and steaming waves charged the shore like bulls with lowered heads.

Two people crawled about the gleaming hull, equipped with magnetic shoes. Both wore antiseptic helmets, as they worked slowly forward from stem to bow. The foremost carried a heatray gun, with the beam diffused and spread wide. Every time he came to one of the many ugly yellowish blotches that dotted the hull, he rayed it out of existence, then moved on. Tommy Strike, co-captain of one of the mightiest ships in the System, was doing out of sheer ennui work fit for the lowliest motoroiler in the crew.

“Granted,” Strike grumbled to his long-suffering companion, “I don’t know anything about handling a centrifugal flier like this. Just the same, Gerry made me co-captain, and it’s my duty to learn. But every time I slip into the pilot-house she runs me out. Says I’m like a man in a kitchen, with a positive genius for getting in the way!”

“Yes, sir.” Sub-pilot Barrows carefully examined a spot cleared by the blast of Strike’s weapon, looking for evidence of pitting. If he found any, a spray of liquid metal quickly remedied the damage. “Yes, sir, I believe the periodic wind has about subsided.”

“You’d think she’d at least let me head one of the hunting parties. I know a damn sight more about this planet than any of the others. But no, one of the captains must remain with the ship, and since Gerry Carlyle always leads the hunt! My orders are countermanded, and I sit around twiddling my thumbs. A guy don’t mind being babied part of the time, but I want to marry a woman, not a flock of apron strings!”

“Yes, sir. I guess we’re about through, sir.” Barrows was trying desperately to change the subject.

“I tell you I’m ripe, Barrows, ripe for rebellion!” Strike waved his gun around in good-natured melodrama. But beneath his good humor there was a warning note of seriousness.

“Yes, sir,” said Barrows, still trying. “Amazing how versatile these bacterial colonies are, particularly in these latitudes.”

As he spoke, a culture sailed up on the dying wings of the breeze and smacked right across the name-plate of The Ark. It was a nasty, gummy mess. Strike rayed it viciously.

“Not so amazing. Back on Earth bacteria multiply rapidly as sin. They have great adaptability; they have motility; they release acids and virulent toxins. Small wonder these giant bacteria have developed further in conditions like these,” he sent his heat-beam hissing into the fog, “so they ride the periodic winds and destroy nearly everything they touch. Infection is terribly fast on Venus.”

As soon as the regular air raid of bacteria and fungus spores had ceased, the ship was quickly cleaned. The two figures scrambled awkwardly to the ground, made their way to an open port. It was like stepping into bedlam. The entire rear half of the ship, partitioned off into numerous holds for comfortable transportation of the strange lifeforms that were the expedition’s objectives, was in a terrific uproar.

Squeals, yowls, hisses, roars—every conceivable variation of audible animal fury assaulted the ear-drums. For “Catch-‘em alive” Carlyle, as usual, had been extremely successful during her brief visit to the unknown northern latitudes of Venus.

Almost hourly the hunting parties returned with magnificent specimens — everything from the incredible Atlas crab to the sea squirrel, the little rodent with feet like sea-sleds, which ran about agilely over the surface of the ocean, and whose body contained so much oil that the stuff squeezed out of its eyes and splashed from its opened mouth.

They even had one of the rare and famous bolas-birds, the only flying creature of any size native to Venus, with infra-red-sensitive eyes to pierce the mists. It carried three bony structures dangling from its body on tough strings of cartilage; these were used as a weapon much like the ancient Argentine bolas, to

ensnare victims. The bolas-bird was its own worst enemy, frequently strangling itself in the excitement of a chase.

Strike put away his helmet, grimaced at the clamor, and led the way along the main corridor to the chartroom in the bow of the ship. There he found Gerry Carlyle, poring over incomplete maps and faded notes. As always when coming into the presence of that amazing young woman, her matchless beauty caught him at his throat. He watched for a moment the familiar curves of her profile, the stubborn chin, the tousled mop of silken blond hair. Then she sensed his presence and turned.

“Hi, Tommy.”

“Hi, Gerry.” They grinned at each other. They didn’t often have moments alone, with all barriers down. “About ready to pull out o’ here? We’ve got a nifty cargo this time.”

“Yes. Splendid haul.” Gerry thoughtfully took a small tablet from a packet on the table, put it in her mouth to suck.

“Good Lord!” Tommy said in disgust. “Just because you endorsed those things is no sign you have to use ‘em, too! Why —”

“The Energine people gave me a fat check for that endorsement; I believe in loyalty to an employer. Besides, they’re not so bad. ‘Be Buoyant — Eat Energines!’” She laughed. “As I was going to say, though, our hunting is about finished here, and I’ll be ready to leave after we make a try at finding the Lost Continent.”

Strike’s eyes gleamed. The Lost Continent of Venus, a myth, a legend, a romantic fabrication of fictioneers based on a scrap of map, a half dozen lines in a log-book. Sidney Murray, greatest of the early interplanetary explorers, had hastily sketched in a few cryptic lines on his Venusian map, indicating a continent or large island in Mare Gigantum; six sentences in the log told of passing hurriedly over this uncharted region as they left the planet. From that day henceforward no Earthman apparently had ever set eyes on this mysterious land and returned to tell of it.

“You know,” mused Gerry, “it’s funny no one but Murray ever saw this elusive continent or island. Others have tried to find it, too. In fact, some have searched

for it and never returned. Odd —”

Strike was reminded of his grievance.

“Well, we’ll know more about that when and if we locate the place. No use speculating about it. But look, Gerry. I’ve been thinking —”

“Hear, hear!”

“That despite the fact we’ve had a successful trip, there’s still lots of room left in the holds. So I was wondering —”

“Well?”

“Well, I’m more or less extra baggage around here, and I thought nobody’d mind if I roped in a few specimens of my own. I could pick up a pretty fair piece of change for ‘em back on Earth. Enough maybe to buy a marriage license and post the bond.” That was during the brief political tenure of the Domestic Tranquility party—referred to as the D. T.’s by the opposition press — one of whose platform planks was the posting of a bond by every prospective husband and bride, to be forfeited upon failure of either party to do his or her utmost to build a happy home.

Gerry looked dubious.

“There’s a standard price for most of this extra-planetary stuff, you know, and it’s plenty high. Not many places can afford it. Besides, there aren’t a half dozen zoos on Earth equipped to maintain Venusian life. You weren’t figuring on under-selling me and the other hunters to the regular buyers, were you?”

“Lord, no, Gerry! As a matter of fact, I’d thought of selling them to the motion picture people. Nine Planets Pictures — ” Strike’s voice trailed off into nothingness. Gerry’s smooth white jaw had suddenly become firm, and anger sparkled in her eyes like salt on candle flames.

“That outfit of phonies?” she cried. “Never I. That’s something I absolutely forbid, Tommy! The movies! Why, that whole business is a rank fake! Papier mache sets, sound dubbed in after the picture is filmed, half-scale tin space ships for their interplanetary sequences. But what gets me is what they do when they want a Jovian or a Venusian monster for one of their cheap melodramas.

“You know what they do? Their overpaid biochemists get busy and manufacture a creation with no more life or soul than a robot. Press a button and he swipes the heroine; press another and he eats the villain. And Nine Planets Pictures has the colossal nerve to foist these things off on the public as the genuine article! It’s false, Tommy! It’s not right! They’re fakers!”

“But what magnificent fakers,” murmured Strike, softly so Gerry wouldn’t hear. Barrows had come and was hovering anxiously about, trying to avert a quarrel, exuding peace and good-fellowship all over the chartroom,

But Gerry’s tongue was in a favorite groove, her feud that was becoming the delight of the System. She always took as a personal insult any fancied slight upon her profession or the strange lifeforms with which it dealt.

“The main reason I’m even bothering to look for this doubtful Lost Continent is because Nine Planets is making a picture called ‘Lost Continent.’ A week before we took off from London, that baboon Von Zorn came pussyfooting around my business manager. Wanted to know if I intended to bring back any specimens from the Lost Continent.

“He knew it’d make him look silly. So he made me an offer. ‘My dear Miss Carlyle.’” Gerry was an excellent mimic. “‘If you could-er-see your way clear to-um-represent Nine Planets Pictures on your forthcoming expedition-ah-it would be worth a good deal to us. Something spectacular, you know? To-uh-place in the lobby of Froman’s Mercurian Theatre the night of the premiere.’ He made that proposition knowing very well I’d have to break my contract with the London Interplanetary Zoo to agree. You can imagine what I said to him.”

“Yes. I can imagine.” Strike began to look uncomfortable.

Barrows fluttered.

“So if we find anything interesting, we’ll arrange to make Von Zorn squirm when he releases his picture. Oh, no, Tommy. No specimens for the movies. That’s out!”

Tommy Strike could usually take Gerry’s domineering attitude for what it was — a hard-talking sort of bluff that she put on to command the respect and complete loyalty of her crew. But sometimes her act was a bit too realistic. This time he had to choke back a hot retort. He smiled equably.

“So the captain hates the films.”

“Exactly. Besides, all the boys are busy on routine stuff, Tommy.”

“I might pick up a few commercial specimens myself,” he argued mildly. “I’m not exactly a stranger here, you know. I can get around.”

Gerry groaned. “Oh, Tommy. Do not you understand anything about discipline? How many times have you read those signs? Don’t they mean something to you?”

Strike didn’t bother to look up, he knew those signs by heart.

“If the rules governing conduct in this ship seem severe, remember they are the composite of years’ experience, calculated best to serve the interests of economy and personal safety.”

Gerry had a weakness for polysyllabics. Above the annunciator was another one.

We are in a dangerous trade. Failure to cooperate fully jeopardizes the lives of your companions and courts disaster.

Similar Carlyleisms were placed in strategic spots all over the ship, in the control rooms, crew’s quarters, and even the washrooms, sentiments designed to inculcate strict obedience and complete submergence of all personalities to that of Gerry Carlyle. Strike had always felt that while they were essential to insure smooth work and a minimum of accidents with a party strange to the planet, they were never meant to apply to Tommy Strike, who knew Venus as only a veteran Venusian trader can know it.

But now Gerry turned the full battery of her eyes on him. And for a moment all the efficiency and businesslike hardness fell away from her like a poorly fitting cloak, and she was all soft and tender and desirable.

“Tommy,” she whispered. “Don’t you see these rules are for my sake, too? What would happen to me if you went off alone and didn’t come back?”

Strike felt his resistance draining away as if a spigot had been turned inside him. “Okay, Gerry,” he said. “You win.”

But in Strike's cabin was a contract signed by Von Zorn, offering generous rates for anything Strike brought in from the Lost Continent. Gerry or no Gerry, there was big money to be made, money that would remove from Strike the stigma of fortune-hunter when he married the woman.

He looked calculatingly at Barrows.

He had always considered the sub-pilot a weak vessel, but he couldn't hope to entice any of the others away from Gerry. He decided on a surprise attack.

"Well?" whirling on Barrows. "Are you with me or against me?"

Barrows choked. "I beg your pardon, sir, I don't quite —"

"You know damn well what I mean. I'm taking a shot at finding the Lost Continent before Gerry does. If I find it, we're in the money."

Barrows hesitated, but three minutes' vigorous argument persuaded him. Glancing furtively down the metal corridor, he muttered, "Quite against the rules, sir. But if the captain is ordering me —"

"Right! It's an order, then. Pick up the necessary equipment and set a beam. I'll have a plane on the beach in a jiffy."

Barrows had a momentary twinge of conscience.

"What will Miss Carlyle say when she learns you've disobeyed her?"

A beatific expression spread like thin oil over Strike's face.

"Don't worry, Barrows; she'll realize that her remarks were hasty. She'll forgive me," he declared with the unbelievably confident ego of a young man just fallen in love, "because she loves me."

Chapter VI. The Arkette

The tremendous power plant of a centrifugal flier was impracticable for use in any vehicle so small as an airplane; rocket fuels were wasteful and expensive. So the Carlyle party always carried two small ethyl-driven planes for scouting on planets where the atmosphere would support them. It was one of these that Strike

trundled out onto the smooth-packed beach from the rear of The Ark.

It resembled the conventional small all-metal transport in all respects save three. First, it had retractable pontoons as well as retractable landing gear so it was at home on land or sea.

Secondly, it had a seventy-two inch gyroscope which developed a static pressure of thirty pounds per horsepower, as compared to maximum propeller efficiency of six static pounds per horsepower.

This, besides saving fuel, gave the plane a top speed approaching 1,000 miles per hour. And thirdly, a battery of electronic telescopes reproduced on the visual control screen, regardless of the atmosphere's thickness, a miniature shell of visibility, bisected by the horizon and including the sky above and the terrain below the pilot, and everything on either side, for many miles.

Strike had hardly checked gas and instruments when Barrows ran out. There wasn't much equipment: two rifles with a box of hypodermic bullets, antigravity outfit, tiny acousticon receivers for each man to slip into one ear so as to keep on the radio beam, a cathode-gun for emergencies, Strike's heat-beam pistol, and portable telescope.

As Barrows started to step inside, the tail of the plane created a diversion by slowly sliding about in a half circle on the beach. The sub-pilot missed his footing and collapsed in a tangle of equipment.

"Another of those blasted Atlas crabs," Strike swore. "They aren't happy unless they're crawling under something heavy and lifting it."

He sizzled a heatray under the tail assembly, and a violet crab scuttled out. It was about the size of a pie plate, weighing perhaps two pounds. Barrows glared.

'How the devil that mauve menace can handle a ton of duralumin is something I'll never know! Begging your pardon, sir.'

Strike helped him up, shoved him in with the equipment.

"Not so strange if you remember the Hercules beetle back on Earth. That baby weighs about an ounce, yet can carry five and a half pounds! Figuring the proportionate increase in size, the Atlas crab's accomplishments aren't so

miraculous.”

Barrows’ reply was unintelligible. Presently his head popped into view.

“All shipshape, sir. Shall we take off . Oh. look. What sort of a plague is this?”

Strike turned to see a horde of tiny creatures scurrying from out of the fog-hidden forest. They were fuzzy gray things, about the size of terrestrial rabbits; the resemblance was heightened by the way they hopped, and by the presence of a tuft of white tail. But head and shoulders they looked more like naked monkeys, with wrinkled faces like little old men. Strike grunted.

“Never seen them before? We call ‘em duncerabbits. They’re migratory. Terrific pests.”

The duncerabbits were consumed with friendly curiosity and were already swarming all over the beach; some of the bolder ones were even bouncing right into The Ark.

“Duncerabbits?” Barrows inquired.

“Yeah. Their life-span is about a year, at the end of which they all go crazy.”

Barrows looked as if he thought he was being kidded, but was too polite to say so. Strike continued.

“Fact. The microbes of some sort of meningitis-like brain disease are carried about with ‘em. Very virulent, and always fatal as soon as it gets to work. The whole race of duncerabbits is wiped out once a year. It’s funny in a way — they have fits and go through all sorts of contortions like a circus clown.”

“Um. Then how is it the race maintains itself?”

“Oh, they’re monotremes. The females lay their eggs shortly before the periodical madness sets in. The young live on the contents of the eggs until large enough to forage for themselves. Orphans, every one!” Strike looked thoughtful a moment, then scooped up three of the little beggars and tossed them into the plane. He followed, “All set?”

Barrows looked uneasily at the guests, but Strike reassured him.

“Don’t worry. They can’t affect us. I brought ‘em because sometimes they’re useful. Like homing pigeons; keep ‘em in one place a few hours and they’ll come right back to it!”

A touch of the starter and the plane’s powerful engine burst into muffled thunder. No need for much warm-up in those temperatures, so almost at once Barrows guided the plane down the illimitable beach which unrolled like an endless ribbon from an invisible spool always just out of vision’s range. Presently it dropped away, narrowed as it rushed more and more swiftly beneath them, then veered magically away and was replaced by leaden waves. Straight northwest over the Mare Gigantum the stubby Arkette headed, seeking the Lost Continent of Venus.

The three little strangers squalled plaintively in fright. The first one covered his ears at the unfamiliar engine-roar; the second took one look out at the vanishing beach and put his paws over his eyes in panic; the third clapped one paw over his mouth in a ludicrous expression of astonishment. It was too much, even for Strike’s surly mood.

“See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil!” yelled Tommy Strike hilariously, and both crew members bellowed with laughter.

Strike always said afterward that the finding of the so-called Lost Continent was anticlimax, they accomplished it so easily. In fact, it gave him an uneasy qualm or two, almost as if the place deliberately revealed itself to them, enticing them down to some subtle snare.

Barrows was still at the controls after an hour’s steady flying, when Strike noticed the curious behavior of some of the instruments.

“That’s odd. Must be some sort of radiation nearby. This should mean land.”

He was right; it did mean land. Directly ahead, just coming into focus on the visual screen. Barrows throttled down, confused by his erratic instruments, and circled about cautiously. Almost at once he spotted a large level clearing. A rift in the fog allowed him to set the Arkette down easily. And almost at once there came a terrific thunderclap, the sizzling crackle of a bolt of electricity. There was the hiss of molten metal, the smell of ozone.

Barrows and Strike exchanged a startled glance. Ionized air had transmitted to

them a partial shock, but both were insulated somewhat by their rubberized Venusian costumes and the rubber floor mat. Strike peered out cautiously.

By the nose of the plane was a curious plant growth, the sole living thing in the entire clearing. It had three parts: there were two upright stems of tough, leathery stuff, one rising on each side of the plane; in between was a large, flat cup oozing a sticky substance from its walls. As Strike watched, the two stems moved slowly about as if seeking a more vulnerable spot. Again the dazzling bolt crashed from one stem to the other, apparently straight through the motor.

“By Jupiter!” Strike exclaimed. “It’s an electric plant! The two stems act as poles. It generates juice galvanically, like an electric eel, and shoots its bolt from one pole to the other! Anything it hits naturally drops into the nasty looking cup to be digested forthwith!”

“Yes, sir.”

Strike gingerly opened one window.

“Get a load of that smell!” It was a heavy musklike odor-spiced with mint. “Lures things with the smell, probably has a network of sensitive rootlets to register the approach of a victim, then gives ‘em the hot seat! Good name for this jigger would be the Circe plant, eh?”

“Very apt name, sir.”

“Though you’d think, the plant being grounded, that its charge would all leak away. Must have some way of sealing off its cells before generating the electricity.”

“Yes, sir.”

Strike turned scowling.

“Damn it, Barrows! Don’t sit there yessing me dizzy! Contribute something to the conversation or else shut up!”

“Very well, sir. I suggest we take steps to eliminate the plant before it eliminates us. If it’s not too late.” Barrows’ voice was bitter.

“What d’you mean ‘too late’?”

“Just that every electrical instrument on the dash is ruined.”

Tommy Strike wasn’t the man to bother much about disaster until it actually struck. “So what?” he wanted to know. “Our acousticons are all right. We can just follow the beam back to the ship. We know there’re no obstacles sticking out of the sea on our course, to crack up on.”

He drew his heatray gun and leaned out, careful not to touch any of the metal of the plane, and beamed the electric plant into smoking, twisted extinction. The two clambered out and looked around.

“No wonder this clearing is so large and barren,” commented Strike. “Nothing will grow anywhere near a devilish plant like that.”

Barrow’s conscience, and worry over their situation, had made him nervous. He was anxious to get the business over with. He disappeared into the plane again, reappearing loaded down with equipment. He handed Strike a rifle and hypo cartridges, and the cathode-gun to stick into his waist-band. About his waist he strapped the antigravity outfit, and carried by hand the portable electronic Iscope.

“Shall I start the radio, sir? We’ll need a beam to travel on.”

“Nope.” Strike became more genial as action grew imminent. “We’ll take a compass just as good as that.” He pointed to See-No-Evil, Hear-No-Evil, and Speak-No-Evil, scampering about the plane. “They’ll bring us back safe. We used them often at the trading post when they were handy,”

Barrows began to sweat. All his years of training with Gerry Carlyle had drilled deep into his soul the need for every precaution, rigid discipline, strict routine. This casual young man who wandered off into the Venusian mists with nothing but three potentially insane duncerabbits to bring him back was too much.

“But suppose something should happen to them, sir. What, then?”

“Well, we’re still on the beam from The Ark. That’ll bring us back to the general neighborhood of the plane.”

“Yes, air, but it’s so simple just to start the automatic radio beam. It would ease my mind.”

“If you must know, Barrows, someone thoughtfully removed the tubes from the radio before we left. I have my suspicions about that. But in any case, it’s a total loss now. So let’s get going. I certainly don’t want to get caught out here at night.”

“Very good, sir.”

They moved off through the thickly sluggish fog, with all its weird smells and sly noises, in the peculiar sliding gait of the experienced Venusian traveler that keeps the feet from driving very hard into the spongy earth. At the edge of the clearing a lizard scuttled past them into the scant undergrowth. It was an ordinary Venusian lizard in most respects, except that there were two of him, joined together like Siamese twins. Strike stared.

“Say! Did you see that? A freak. Might be worth taking back as a curiosity.” He poked the rifle barrel into a clump of bushes. Instantly a whole horde of the scaly things rushed out in all directions. The whole lot of them were twins, joined! The dumfounded Strike forgot to catch any.

“Well, I’m damned. A race of twin lizards! We must have a few of those, Barrows. Keep an eye out for another batch!”

They pushed on, making careful observations through the portable ‘scope. When they ran across a baby shovelmouth feeding, it was not one, but two of them, identical in appearance and markings. The land-crabs all moved in pairs, frequently joined shell to shell by a chitinous bridge. Even the occasional trees and shrubs grew two by two.

Strike soon saw the light.

“It’s a dual world!” he breathed in awe. “Everything here is born twins!”

“I’ve been thinking about that, sir,” the sub-pilot answered thoughtfully. “Remember how funny the instruments acted before we landed? A radiation of some kind, you thought. Why not one that affects the egg-cell, causing it to divide, or affecting the genes to cause the division, to produce twins?”

“You’ve guessed it. Earthly scientists have done it in the labs. Why shouldn’t it occur in nature? In fact —”

Strike stopped, eyes narrowed at a pair of slim, rubbery trees a few feet away. Normally they stood about fifteen feet high. But —”

The young space explorer hesitated for a moment.

“As we’ve stood here talking, Barrows, one of those trees wrapped about the top of the other and pulled its mate back. Like a slingshot.”

He detected a stealthy movement in the skimpy foliage, and suddenly grabbed Barrows’ arm. and dragged him back out of danger. There was a creaking, a sharp rustle, and a vicious whip-crack as the rubbery trunk lashed out at them like a catapult. The two men were out of harm’s way, but the duncerabbit Hear-No-Evil was struck squarely across the back. Nearly every bone in his little body was broken, and he collapsed like an empty sack on the ground’.

The slingshot tree moved very deliberately toward its victim, turning like a sunflower, touched the shattered creature delicately like a cat sniffing garbage, then slowly withdrew.

“That was wanton!” Strike said slowly. “Cruel. I don’t expect mercy on Venus, but I never yet saw killing up here that wasn’t for sake of survival, food or self-defense. This Lost Continent is a nasty place.”

But unpleasant place or not, Strike was there to capture a real prize — confound that self-sufficient fiance of his — and make himself some money. So he detoured around the slingshot tree and thrust forward into the murk. Within three minutes after leaving The Arkette, they both spotted what they realized would fit every requirement — a specimen spectacular, weird, typical of the Lost Continent, something for which Von Zorn would pay well. It was Barrows who saw it first.

“Mr. Strike,” he whispered. “Straight ahead. D’you see what I see?”

Strike peered at the telescope’s screen, sucked in his breath in sudden delight.

“Oood Oood!” he murmured. “What is it?”

That was a question Barrows couldn't answer. It was easily one of the strangest animals he had ever seen in five years expeditionary work with Gerry Carlyle. The thing had a perfectly round body some four feet high, and it ran on four legs. But amazingly, it carried eight spare legs. One set of four protruded from the left side of its back at a forty-five degree angle; the other set protruded from the right side at a similar angle. In the center of its head was a mouth surrounded by three eyes forming the points of a triangle. The thing was triplets! No matter how it rolled, or which side was undermost, it would always be upright!

Strike quivered with anticipation. He could see Von Zorn's face when he brought this beauty home. He could see Gerry's face, slightly green, as he showed her his check. He could see —

“Hey! He's moving off. Don't let him get away!” Tommy pumped a shell into the chamber and slogged rapidly through the fog. He and Barrows caught up with their quarry in time to see a strange duel.

It was very brief, over in a few seconds, this contest between the twelve-legged monster and another of the deadly slingshot trees. As the animal trotted slowly along a dimly marked game trail, there sounded a swish and crack as the tree attacked. But the dodecaped simply allowed himself to be knocked rolling off to one side, came up on another set of legs, and trotted serenely on just beyond the baffled grasp of the tree.

Strike hugged himself in delight; this was marvelous.

“Nature's balance,” he hissed. “Everything has its match somewhere —”

“Yes, sir; I know. But he's getting away again. Give it to 'em!”

Strike whipped up the hypo rifle and fired. Twelve-legs whirled, nipped at the wound, then began to gallop heavily away. Barrows and Strike ran after him. In a minute or so the drug began to take effect, and the victim stopped with head hanging, wobbling at the knees.

“Got 'em!” yelled Strike in triumph. But too soon. Twelve-legs rolled over onto another set of legs and started off like a sprinter.

“What!” yammered Strike. “That's impossible. He can't do that!”

“If he’s three animals rolled into one,” cried Barrows, throwing his own reserve gun to his shoulder, “each part may be more or less separate from the other. So while the drug paralyzes one-third of ‘im, it takes longer to penetrate to the other two-thirds.”

Barrows fired just as the dodecaped dissolved into the mist. The two men ran ahead and soon caught sight of him again, wavering weakly on very unsteady legs. And for the second time he rolled awkwardly onto his third set of legs and ambled off. Not so vigorously this time: the drug was already beginning to affect the last one-third. Strike finished the job with a final bullet. Twelve-legs lay quietly down to sleep.

It was the work of a moment to slip the antigravity bands around him, adjust the power to the exact balance between gravitation and centrifugal force. The captive hung in the air, gently tugging on his leash, like a gigantic potato sprouting weirdly in every direction.

Strike thrashed about in the undergrowth until he found Speak-No-Evil and See-No-Evil, then started back in the general direction of the plane. At once the duncerabbits seemed to understand, and frolicked ahead of the hunters with an uncanny sense of direction. They had nearly reached the clearing again when Barrows, who was leading, stopped so suddenly that Strike catapulted into him from behind. Twelve-legs also floated, up and gently nudged the two of them.

“What the devil?” Strike wondered.

Barrows pointed with a nervous finger. “It’s a man, by Jupiter! It’s a man!”

Chapter VII. The Twin Race

It wasn’t a man, as closer inspection revealed. But anything that stands upright on Venus is easily mistaken for human in the eternal misty shroud. And the stranger certainly stood upright; he could scarcely do otherwise with his six legs. They grew at evenly spaced intervals from around his waist, long and slim. Two of them apparently served also as arms, judging from the way he scratched at his rounded abdomen, hanging like a ripe fruit inside the forest of legs.

From the waist down he reminded Strike of an earthly octopus, or a spider. But from the waist up the creature was definitely manlike, with conventional torso, neck, and head.

“That,” said Barrows uneasily, “could be a dangerous customer. See those claws, and the armor-plate all over his body, and the fangs!”

“Yes, but look at his face. He’s bound to be peaceful because he’s a congenital idiot. Just look at the expression!”

Both men stared fascinated at the play of emotion across the thing’s countenance. Expressions succeeded each other fleetingly with the rapidity of a motion picture—exhilaration, fear, surprise, anger, boredom, love, and sometimes just plain nothing. Like a ham actor trying to register everything he could in the shortest possible time.

“Apparently he’s prey to every emotion in the book,” Barrows suggested. “No selectivity. No brains at all.”

Strike raised a palm in the universal gesture of friendship.

“Hi, fella,” he called tentatively. No result. The stranger was joined by three more of his kind, and they milled around in aimless curiosity.

Strike tried a few syllables of the native lingo he had learned as a trader in the southern latitudes. No response. Presently the four creatures wandered off haphazardly through the fog. They fought, showed affection, sulked, and pranced in bewildering inconsistency.

After about five minutes of random circling, the four beings suddenly raised their heads simultaneously, stood a moment as if listening intently, then loped off in a straight line. Strike scooped up the two duncerabbits and stuffed them inside his tunic so as not to lose them, and followed. Barrows tagged along perforce.

“Funny how they all decided to go the same direction at once. I didn’t hear anything, did you, Strike?”

Strike grunted. This running around in the stifling Venusian atmosphere was making him pant like an ancient steam engine. He was also faintly concerned about getting entirely off the beam from The Ark. Already the steady tone faded down to an intermittent warning note. The duncerabbits might not be infallible, of course, and if they moved further to the side —

Fortunately they did not. The four creatures led them only a short way, stopping

soon before a structure with the appearance of a giant bee-hive punctured by numerous entrances. It seemed to be a sort of community igloo built of several individual mud huts joined in a cluster. There were perhaps a store of doorways, and before each opening sat the amazing counterparts of the six-legged morons. They were counterparts in physical structure, that is, but not in mental capacity. For their enormous brain cases and haggard expressions indicated obviously that here were beings whose sole aim in life was to cerebrate. As each of the original four took position beside a different one of the thinkers, Strike saw the; light.

Strike cried out.

‘Twins again!’ he exclaimed delightedly. ‘See? Each pair is twins. You can tell if you examine ‘em feature by feature. One is entirely emotional. Get it, Barrows? Evolution’s greatest experiment. Complete divorce between the intelligence and the emotions, so the former can work unhampered by the vestigial remnants we call emotions! It’s what earthly philosophers have dreamed of for centuries!’

‘I’m going to dream of it for some time myself. It’s a nightmare.’

‘You don’t see the beauty of it, Barrows. Look. The Intellectuals think things out to a perfect conclusion by pure, unadulterated reason, then instruct their emotional-counterparts to carry out their decision. The Emotionals must be the active, executive half of the combination, to be used only when there’s work to be done. That’s why they’re so fully equipped, fang and claw, to do battle. It’s their job to bring food, protect the home, reproduce.’

‘See? If the Intellectuals decide something ought to be destroyed, they probably tell the Emotionals to generate a lot of hate and go out to do the job. If they reason it’s time to mate, they pull out the love stops on the twins, who-er —’

‘Yes, but how does this communication take place? I haven’t heard an audible syllable yet.’

‘Telepathic control, of course. If any individuals are more nearly en rapport than others, it’s twins.’

‘Hm-m. It occurs to me we may be a little reckless, Captain. We don’t have any idea what’s going on in those brains until the action starts. And judging from the head size, some pretty potent thoughts may be boiling around in there.’

“I disagree, Barrows. Size doesn’t necessarily mean brain-power! Venus is too young to permit any colossus of intellect to be developed yet. After a few more geologic ages, maybe, if the experiment is a success, our friends here will be the cosmic tops. But not now. Look at their — homes. Crude in the extreme. No evidence of mechanical development, or any kind of invention. No weapons, even.”

“Because naturally they have no emotional urge to develop. They don’t care about progress, or appearance, eh?” Barrows asked.

“Right. I’ll wager they wouldn’t care whether they lived or died if it weren’t for an instinct for self-preservation. They respond only to simple nerve stimuli such as discomfort, weariness, hunger and so on.”

“Then what do they think about?”

Strike shrugged.

“Hard to say. Maybe to them the discovery that two plus two is four would be the finding of a great philosophic postulate.” He stepped closer and tried his native Venusian on the Intellectuals without result. They simply sat staring at the Earthlings, sad eyed and mute.

“Maybe we’re not enough developed for their telepathic efforts,” Barrows snickered.

“No-o. It takes either a receptive mind or a mind easily controlled to make telepathic contact. I was wondering if we could take a pair of these along with us. We...”

“Contrary to law, sir. No interference with life having an intelligence over a certain level. Eighth, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. You’re right this time. Besides, it might stir up a fuss.” And the two men stood there, watching the strange tribe of twins, wondering what to do next. That problem was taken from their hands by See-No-Evil and Speak-No-Evil.

Annoyed by their confinement in Strike’s tunic, they wiggled free and dropped to the ground. In an instant the village erupted in an astounding flurry of activity.

It was like a well-rehearsed bit of continuity, smoothly presented, over in a flash.

The duncerabbits scampered about to limber up cramped muscles. The Intellectuals promptly but calmly turned around on unsteady legs and vanished inside their huts, to the last man. The Emotionals, momentarily blank-faced, suddenly burst into a hideous cacophony of squalling and yowling.

Fear written in large letters on their faces, they scattered wildly into the shelter of the fog in all directions. The act was completed as the Intellectuals closed the entrances to their abode by swinging into place what appeared to be a shimmering shield of crimson tissue of some sort. The clamor died away to silence.

“Well!” exclaimed Strike. “Would you. get a dish of that!”

Barrows was definitely worried now.

“Yes, sir. Perhaps they’re allergic to duncerabbits. But wouldn’t we be wise to leave —”

But Strike was already marching up close, examining the doorways of the community house.

“Say, Barrows! This red thing’s a gullet. What they have in the doorways here looks like a tropical fish, only his mouth is wide open all the time. He’s as big around as he’s long!”

Strike poked and pried and finally learned the secret. The fishlike creature lived on the bacteria colonies and fungus spores that floated in the air, straining them out before passing the air on through the gills. Filling the aperture completely with its bulk, it thus cleaned the air before allowing it to pass into the interior.

“Air-conditioning!” proclaimed Strike. “Venusian style!”

“Yes, sir. Nature’s check-and-balance again. I remember my grandmother once told me that her people years ago used to get water from holes in the ground, and they used to drop a pike in these wells so it’d eat all the worms and bugs and keep the water pure.

“Same principle exactly. They hang these domesticated babies in the doorway ‘til they get so big they no longer fit. The Intellectuals naturally aren’t fitted to cope with disease, or anything physical-no resistance. And the reason they’re so

afraid of the duncerabbits is because the little beggars carry with them the seeds of madness. See?"

Strike turned to gesture to Barrows, but saw only the sub-pilot's heels as the latter sprinted wildly away into the fog. Strike glanced about sharply, and saw the entire horde of Emotionals running at him with expressions of indescribable hate and ferocity. The Intellectuals had given the command to destroy.

Strike's heat-beam hissed in a half circle. It had no effect whatsoever. He concentrated the beam to a narrow, stabbing bolt of flame; it barely blackened the flesh of his attackers. Too late he remembered: this was the gun he had used to clean off The Ark. Its charge was almost completely spent! With one motion he stuck the weapon back in his belt and dashed away after Barrows. Sudden death thundered at his heels.

Earth-trained muscles easily out ran the pursuers, and a miracle of good luck led the two hunters straight to the big clearing, despite Barrows' loss of the electronic telescope in his flight. There was no time to stowaway their specimen, so Strike hurriedly fastened lead-rope and antigravity apparatus to the tail-skid.

The weightless dodecaped shouldn't interfere with flying the plane; they could set down safely in the sea and do the job right later on. Quickly Strike scooped up See-No-Evil and Speak-No-Evil, tossed them in the plane. As he reached up to follow, the tail of the plane deliberately crawled away. Strike stumbled and cracked his chin.

"What, again?" Strike risked a hasty look under the tail. "It's that Atlas crab! Probably a stowaway." He yanked the big crustacean out and tossed him into the cabin, too. "I wouldn't leave a mother-in-law in this hellhole!"

Twenty wild-eyed Emotionals poured out of the mist and attacked the plane with an unbridled savagery that made even the hardened Strike gasp. He fired his gun at them again, futilely, then leaped in with Barrows and slammed the door.

With absolute disregard of consequence the creatures ripped viciously at metal and glass with their claws, bit at them with hideous, drooling fangs. The whole plane rocked dangerously from the furious attack.

"Good God, Captain!" quavered Barrows. "Let's get out of here!"

“Right!” Strike turned on the ignition, stepped on the starter. The engine did not start. Again he tried, and again, with no result. Finally he looked at Barrows sideward.

“That damn Circe plant! It probably ruined the wiring and ignition. And we can hardly step outside to make repairs.”

Barrows began to crack.

“Then we-we’re finished. No motor, no radio. I knew I shouldn’t have disobeyed Miss Carlyle. She’s always right. We never should have tried it alone.”

Strike simmered.

“Never mind moaning about Gerry. We’re a long way from being finished yet. Give me that cathode gun.”

He took the cumbersome pistol, lowered one window a slit to slip the barrel through, pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Strike began to curse bitterly. The cathode gun worked with a delicate “electrical trigger.” It had been fastened in contact with the metal dashboard when the Circe plant’s charge passed through, and the mechanism was blown out.

“Perhaps the hypo rifles — ” Barrows suggested without conviction.

“Not a chance. Those hypodermic slugs are made to burst as soon as they enter soft flesh. They’ll never penetrate these armor-plated devils.” Strike tried, of course, seeking to put his shots in the enemy’s eyes. But such marksmanship was impossible under the circumstances.

Barrows’ nerves were going rapidly, and his whole body shook in fear. He tried to conceal it in shame, but failed. Strike rallied him.

“Now look, Barrows; don’t get the wind up over nothing. Everything’s under control. As long as I’m here you don’t need to worry.”

“I wish The Ark were here. Then we’d have no worries.”

“You’ve just had that organization stuff pounded into you so long you can’t believe a man’s worth anything alone. I tell you I’m a match for anything this

planet has got. Think I've showed all my aces yet? Not by a long shot. Remember my gag with the whiz bangs? You watch."

Barrows' "Yes, sir," was not hearty.

Strike pointed to Speak-No-Evil, who had retreated to the extreme rear of the compartment and was running about in tight little circles as fast as he could go, like a spinning mouse. Presently he fell down quivering and kicking pitifully like an epileptic, bumping his head blindly against the walls as he jerked around.

"Periodic insanity," declared Strike. "I've been hoping for that. Remember what started this—the Intellectuals' fear of the duncerabbits? Well, suppose we toss Speak-No-Evil into the enemy's camp!"

Barrows nodded slowly. "I see what you mean —"

Strike gently captured the dying little creature, then turned on Barrows sharply. "What's the matter with you? Your lip's bleeding."

"Nothing, sir. I was just thinking. One of us must leave the plane to carry the duncerabbit to the —"

Strike laughed shortly, gazing keenly at this man he had considered a weakling.

"So you were going to make the big, sacrifice, eh? Now, now, Barrows," he chided. "No melodramatics. I meant it when I said you needn't worry with me along. You just watch the old master strut his stuff."

Strike swelled a trifle. He really had a pretty scheme this time. Opening a small trapdoor in the cabin floor, he dropped the stowaway Atlas crab through to the ground. Then he quickly drew in the landing gear until most of the plane's weight rested on the crab's back.

With the trap still open, he thrust his nearly useless heat-gun down and played the weak beam in a half circle behind the crab, forcing it to move in the desired direction, and move the ship along with it. Using the beam to guide the crab, they slowly crossed the clearing and moved into sight of the Intellectuals' community house.

Strike rose, smiling a bit grimly.

“They asked for this! Barrows, waggle the tail a bit to distract our friends’ attention.” He picked up the duncerabbit, who was too far gone to respond. “This’ll hurt you more than it does me, but it’s in a good cause. Ready, Barrows?”

It went off like clockwork. Barrows kicked the rudder bar, the Emotionals rushed down to tear the tail surfaces apart. Strike swiftly stepped out, hurled the duncerabbit for a perfect bulls-eye through one of the openings to the domed structure, then retreated to safety.

He became academic.

“D’you know what I figure should happen now?”

Barrows sat with hands pressed between his knees, shivering. “No.”

“Well, Speak-No-Evil ought to finish off the Intellectuals. That’ll leave the Emotionals with no brain control. They’ll have to try and think for themselves. And when that happens-Ever hear of the case of Oscar, the pig? It happened many years ago. About nineteen-thirty-seven, I think. Some psychologists placed this experimental pig in a position so-he’d have to try and think his way clear. It proved too much, and Oscar had a nervous breakdown and died. See?”

Barrows saw, and they sat quietly waiting.

Their wait was short. In an incredibly short time Speak-No-Evil’s virus was spread to the most vulnerable host it could have found on all Venus. With unbelievable virulence it struck, ravaging the physically frail Intellectuals with the speed of a prairie fire. Even Strike was shocked at sight of the bloody horrors that staggered into view from the community house. From every door they came, smeared with straw-colored blood as cerebral hemorrhages opened the cranial arteries.

It was the more terrible because of the utterly blank expression on those gray faces, which should have been registering pain and desperation. Self-preservation drove them blindly into the open; logic bade them flee Speak-No-Evil and his deadly cargo. But in vain. Before they even had time to instruct their emotional twins, they were stricken helpless by the plague, collapsed in an irregular pattern of untidy bundles on the soggy earth.

But Strike's strategy did not produce the expected results. The Emotionals showed no signs of realizing that their tribe was reduced by half. Animated by their mentors' last emotional command-fury and hate and lust for blood-they continued their blindly bitter and senseless assault on the unmoving metal of the plane, hammering and clawing with unabated savagery.

"I guess I was wrong this time," Strike admitted. "I thought surely the twins were in telepathic communications all the time. And when that union was broken, the Emotionals would be like rudderless ships. It's a devil of a time to be finding it out, but it appears Gerry was right again. Not much use saying I'm sorry, Barrows."

"Forget it, Captain. After all, they can't keep it up forever. They're flesh and blood; they'll tire eventually."

Strike shook his head dubiously.

"Rage looses a lot of adrenaline into the system. Angry men are stronger, more enduring, than normally. These playmates of ours won't quit until they drop from exhaustion."

And so it seemed as the attack continued with uncanny lack of diminution. An irregular piece of metal dropped from the roof of the storage compartment, eaten through by an irregular circle of acid. Strike's lips drew down, in amazement.

"Looks like nitric acid, and not poison, in those fangs. Though if bees secrete formic acid, and man secretes HCL, there's no reason why nitric couldn't be secreted." He locked the door between cabin and storage room as the rear of the plane, not having any insulation or soundproofing materials, would be eaten through first. "It's lucky they haven't the brains to know that acid is their best weapon. Perhaps they'll leave when it gets dark. Too cold for 'em."

The sub-pilot fought for composure with every word.

"It's thirty hours before darkness."

The periodic wind had risen again, carrying its deadly freight of wandering bacteria. They were plastering gradually over the surface of the plane. Their acidulous toxins would speed the work of the Emotionals, who were apparently entirely impervious to infection and disease.

Barrows broke out a pair of antiseptic helmets, in case the bacteria should slip through, then sat looking with unseeing eyes at the sign above the control panel:

“Individuals have no part in this expedition. We are a TEAM!”

Tommy Strike stared helplessly out on an utterly alien and hostile world, watching it bring all its untamed powers to bear in a terrible plan for his destruction.

Chapter VIII. The Rotifer

‘When Gerry Carlyle first learned that Strike had gone out on his own, she simply smiled sadly.

“Von Zorn’s been after him. I know it. Von Zorn’s cunning; he’s sly. But he didn’t reckon with Tommy’s fundamental good sense. Tommy won’t go far: he’ll understand I’m right about these things. He’ll be back shortly. Besides, I took the radio out of The Arkette just in case. He’ll have to return!”

After the passage of three hours and still no Tommy, Gerry chuckled tolerantly.

“Just a touch of pride. He’ll show up pretty soon. I know he wouldn’t do anything to spite me because,” with the incredibly fatuous faith of the young woman in love, “he loves me!”

But when ten hours passed without a sign of the missing duo, Gerry finally felt the brooding sense of impending tragedy. The familiar iron came into Gerry’s ‘ jaw. She crackled an order into the intra-ship communicator. Chief Pilot Michaels, a middle-aged gray eagle of an Englishman with thousands of flying hours to his credit, hurried in.

“That man of mine,” snapped Gerry, “has got himself into a jam, I’m afraid. We leave here in thirty minutes. Prepare to take off, Michaels. On the jump, now!”

All was methodical confusion, then. Outstanding hunting parties were called in, a whiff of anesthetic quieted the tumultuous specimens in the holds, equipment was stowed away, a hundred and one details attended to with the efficient precision that marked all Carlyle-trained crews. In much less than the allotted half hour The Ark was ready to take off, her centrifuge whining with leashed power.

The pilot house was cleared save for Michaels and Gerry Carlyle.

“Will you set the course, Miss Carlyle?”

“Straight northwest over the sea. All we can do is follow the general direction of the beam that Barrows set up before he and Tommy left. Surely not even Tommy is fool enough to leave the beam.”

“Righto.” Michaels switched on the electronic telescope, gently lifted The Ark from the beach. “Might I inquire — d’you have a definite plan for locating the plane, or do we just shoot hit-or-miss?”

Gerry opened a built-in cabinet, brought out and set up a simple-looking apparatus.

“This is a capacity alarm,” she said. “The son of one of the Zoo directors invented it. Intended it to be a meteor detector, but I forgot to try it out coming over. It’ll have a real test now.” She smiled grimly.

There was a single upright metal plate, wired to the grid of an enormous vacuum tube. Several smaller tubes behind the detector tube made the instrument more sensitive. “It works,” explained Gerry, “like an electric variable condenser —”

“But I say, it has only one wall. Surely all condensers have two.”

“Exactly. Only in this case the second wall is formed by any metallic body which comes within a certain range. When I switch on the current, there’ll be a perfect electronic balance in the vacuum-tube set-up. It will be upset by the approach of any metal, which naturally changes the capacity. Any such change is registered on the dial here, and rings an alarm bell.”

“Very ingenious,” drawled Michaels. “Especially for Venus, which is poor in metals. Don’t worry, Miss Carlyle; we’ll find Mr. Strike all right. That’s a pretty tough lad to hurt.”

“Don’t be silly, Michaels. You don’t think I look worried, I hope.”

Michaels smiled one of his rare smiles.

“No, miss. You don’t look worried. But I know.” He squeezed her shoulder

paternally. “Why don’t you lie down and try to relax?”

Gerry’s lip quivered just once, then stiffened.

“Familiarity with your captain isn’t encouraged here, Michaels. Remember your place, please.”

Michaels knew this woman, even better than Strike did. So he simply saluted, nodded, “Righto, Miss Carlyle,” and poured power into The Ark’s giant centrifuges.

About 800 miles out from the mainland, Michaels noticed a curious misbehavior among some of the instruments. He called Gerry’s attention to it. “I daresay there’s some sort of radiation hereabouts. Land —”

His voice was drowned by a sudden clamor from the metal-detector alarm. Gerry sprang to the dial; it was jerking wildly.

“Stop the ship!” she cried. “The plane is somewhere close by!”

They both stared eagerly into the telescope’s fluorescent screen, while the ship hovered, penetrating the mists.

“Land, all right. Probably the so called Lost Continent.” But there was no enthusiasm in Gerry’s voice. The Arkette was not in sight.

“I’ll change the condenser capacity, shorten the range. Then we’ll move slowly in one direction. If there’s no response, we return and try another direction, until the alarm registers again. By repeatedly shortening the range, we’ll find the plane.”

It didn’t take long. Methodically casting about in the fog like a hound after a lost scent, they spotted The Arkette. It bore little resemblance to an airplane. Surrounded by a seething mass of strange six-legged furies, pitted and scored and completely broken in toward the rear where acids had eaten deep, splotched from nose to tail with hundreds of ugly bacteria colonies, it looked like nothing more than a nasty fester spot in the heart of a Venusian morass.

Gerry Carlyle ordered The Ark down, then looked the situation over with iron-nerved calm. The sequence of events was not clear. The Intellectuals were an

unrecognizable mess of decay already. Twelve-legs kicked feebly nearby as the drug wore off, bouncing gently around, apparatus dangling. While the Emotionals, tireless as machines, bit by bit were tearing the plane apart.

“They can hardly be alive,’ Gerry observed without a quaver. “But get the broadcasting room, Michaels. Have them try to get in touch with the plane. The Arkette has no receiver, so send the message on the beam carrier frequency. They’ll pick it up through the acousticon, if — ” She swallowed. “Tell Tommy to waggle the elevators if he — if he’s alive.”

The message was sent, repeatedly. Gerry and every man in the crew watched intently for the answering signal from The Arkette. Minutes passed, and it did not come. It never came.

Sharp lines gradually etched themselves across the clear skin of Gerry’s face.

“Well, apparently I’ve killed the thing I love — ” She spoke casually, too casually to deceive Michaels.

“That’s rot, Miss Carlyle,” he said. “The fault is not —”

Gerry whirled on him, and the chief pilot drew back suddenly embarrassed at the wild grief in her eyes.

“None of your namby-pamby sympathy, Michaels!” she cried. “Tommy wasn’t one for tears and soft words. He was a fighter, and if he’s gone he’d want a fighter’s epitaph. We’re going to blast this hellhole back into the sea! Kranz!” she called into the annunciator. “Bring one of the cathode cannon to bear on that mob outside!”

Michaels leaped forward.

“Hold it, Kranz!” he snapped, and turned to his superior. “Wait, Miss Carlyle. They may be alive but unconscious. If you use the cathode cannon, it’ll wipe out the plane and everything.”

Gerry bit her lip indecisively, almost carried away by her lust for revenge.

“You’re right, Mike. Same thing would hold true for the heatray, too. Best we could do would be to pick off one every now and then as he stepped back out of

line with the plane.”

“The paralysis ray?”

“Even worse. It’s fatal to humans at very low power. And surely Tommy would have tried the hypo rifle.”

“Anesthetic gas?”

“In this wind? Don’t run wild, Mike; you’re not thinking straight.”

Michaels subsided. After momentary silence, Gerry spoke half to herself.

“A decoy would be useless. Because those devils have completely ignored that twelve-legged nightmare bouncing around out there. From the moment we arrived, they haven’t been diverted an instant from their assault on the plane. But if something were to attack them-Michaels! Didn’t one of the parties bring in some rotifera at the last minute?”

“You mean those Venusian buzzardlike jiggers that eat everything? Yes, Miss.”

“Well, why not let one of ‘em loose? It’ll finish off those things out there and won’t injure the plane.”

“An excellent idea, Miss, except that I fear even a rotifer would meet his match out there. Look at that armor plating over their bodies. Those claws. And judging from the plane’s appearance, they secrete an acid, too. No, although the rotifer will tackle anything within reason, I’m afraid this job’s too much.”

“Well, we’re going to try it, anyhow.”

“Righto. But why not provide for defeat in advance?”

“How so?”

“If those beauties are going to eat the rotifer, instead of vice versa, let’s give them a real bellyful. Pump the rotifer full of some poison that won’t work immediately on the rotifier itself!”

“Mike, you’re marvelous!” Gerry turned to the annunciator. “Kranz! Have you

heard what we've been saying? Then hop to it. Rout out all the poisons you can find in the stockroom. And hurry!"

In five minutes Kranz' voice came fearfully over the wire.

"Sorry, Captain. No poisons aboard, no lethal drugs. Just medicines."

For an instant it seemed as if someone were about to suffer the wrath of Gerry Carlyle. But she controlled herself with an effort.

"Of course there's no poison. We catch 'em alive. What use would we have for poisons. But there must be something, something-Medicine! There's gallons of lurninal in the storeroom. The standard space-sickness remedy. You know what lurninal does, Mike? Affects strongly the autonomic nervous system, counteracts adrenaline. It destroys emotion. And if emotion is gone, all desire to kill is gone, too! Kranz? You —"

"Coming up, Miss Carlyle," said the annunciator hollowly.

The scheme was quickly put into effect. A huge hypodermic poured charge after charge of lurninal into the giant six-foot dough-gray ball. A gangway was thrust out from one of the rear ports, and the rotifer rolled quietly down. Once free, it paused uncertainly with its forest of stout cilia delicately exploring the air for vibrations. Then unerringly the blind devourer, the scavenger of Venus, rumbled straight toward the tumult that marked the wreck of The Arkette.

Never in all their experience had the crew of The Ark seen a jungle battle carried on with such unbridled and appalling ferocity. The rotifer, though plainly functioning subnormally with so much lurninal inside it, took the initial advantage by virtue of surprise. There was a sharp clashing as the armored Emotionals were struck by the chitinous lorica of the rotifier, and two of the former vanished into the rotifer's vast gullet.

The ruthless attack forced the Emotionals reluctantly to transfer their fury from the plane to the new enemy. When they did so, the conclusion was foregone. A hundred savage claws knifed into the chinks in the rotifer's armor, ripped him apart in a dozen places. Acid seethed on the chitinous covering; being protein, it turned yellow and began to break down slowly. The rotifier fought like a bulldog, never moving backward an inch, but vicious fangs quickly devoured his exposed soft parts. Shortly all that remained were a few scattered chunks of

flesh.

The Emotionals, not relaxing in their fantastic fury an instant, returned to the crumbling plane. But perceptibly now they lost enthusiasm for the job. Presently one of them slumped quietly down in the mess and sat with face utterly blank, devoid of expression. Two or three others wandered aimlessly off into the fog.

Emotion, for the time being, had completely left them; their intelligent counterparts were dead. They had no brains, no desires, no impulses of any kind. Their existence was a complete blank, save for simple nerve-responses to pain or heat or cold or hunger and the like.

They stared foolishly at the havoc they had wrought, and drifted away without purpose into the fog.

Gerry led the grim party of men and women from The Ark, but before they had covered half the distance the tangled mass of The Arkette suddenly shook violently and burst apart. A mighty shout went up as two disheveled figures staggered into view. They were dirty, bloodied where questing claws had found a mark, scorched where acids had seared them-but very much alive. Behind them frolicked a fuzzy gray duncerabbit, delirious with joy.

In a devastating rush all the bitterness, the pent-up grief, the self-castigation, the hatred and determination for vengeance, drained away from Gerry's soul and left her weak and gasping with reaction. For one of her rare, brief moments, she was fragile and fearful and trembling for the man she loved.

"Tommy!" she shrieked, and ran headlong into his arms. Strike's antiseptic helmet, which had protected his face from acid as well as infection, fell apart with the shock. He took every possible advantage of the situation, immediately and competently, while the crew stood around grinning. They quizzed and felicitated Barrows, who explained through chattering teeth that they'd been unable to signal as requested because the control wires had been eaten through with acid.

The years of training reasserted themselves, however. Gerry pulled free and turned on her crew.

"Discipline," she remarked frigidly, "must be maintained. You know the rule about leaving the ship during the periodic winds without antiseptic protection.

You're all docked two days' pay, including myself. Now get back to the ship at once."

The crew departed in haste.

"As for you," Gerry scanned Strike in disapproval, "you've disobeyed your captain, broken practically every rule we have by going off on an unauthorized trip, insufficiently equipped, without even a radio. You've disrupted the expedition, thrown us off our schedule, very nearly cost us two lives."

Strike nodded. "I deserve your very best tongue lashing. Loose the vials of your contumely."

"This is, no joking matter, Tommy. Look at that plane. A total loss. Do you think even the London Interplanetary Zoo can afford to throw a few thousand away on every expedition just to convince some young hothead he's wrong? No, indeed. That's coming out of your salary."

Strike squirmed. Gerry's clear voice was being heard and enjoyed by the entire crew. She continued with eloquence, cataloguing his sins with devastating point and accuracy.

"And now I want your word of honor that you'll never try a stunt like this again. No more lone-wolfing?"

"All right, Gerry. But don't yell."

"I'm not yelling. Furthermore, you're working for me only. No more contracts with Von Zorn?"

"So you guessed that?" He sighed a bit. "All right; no more divided loyalties."

"And no more —"

Strike glanced at his watch, miraculously still working, and interrupted. "Time's up, Gerry. I've rated this verbal message, and I've taken it like a little gentleman. I've promised everything you want, but now the lecture is over."

"Oh, is it? Tommy, I've just begun to tell you —"

“Oh, no. You’ve finished telling me, because I’m about to employ the one sure method I know to stop you.” He grinned.

“Oh.” Gerry was a little breathless. “Oh, dear, you’re going to kiss me, aren’t you?”

SATELLITE FIVE

Chapter IX. Cacus

Tommy Strike let out a startled squawk and tried to leap aside. Then suddenly his legs folded limply beneath him, and he fell to the floor.

“Blast it!” he howled at the man behind the desk. “Turn that thing off! You’ve crippled me for life!”

The man behind the desk was past middle age, with rabbitlike eyes peering through thick lenses. On the desk-top before him rested a lead-gray box, the interior of which contained a bewildering array of weird tubes and coils. There was a portable power unit, and a Cameralike lens: now focused on Strike’s lower body. The man fumbled for the activating switch, snapped it off.

“Oh-so sorry, Mr. Strike. No harm intended. Just checking my-er-apparatus, seeing that it’s in working order.” Which explained nothing as far as his victim was concerned.

Strike reassured himself that his legs were still sound, then advanced on the older man, who retreated around the desk in alarm with apology very plain on his face.

“I’ve never struck a man as old as you,” Strike said grimly, “but so help me, I’ve a good notion to clip you down!”

It was at times like these when Tommy Strike was led to wonder, privately, if he had been really bright in allowing Gerry to argue him out of the independence of a trader’s life — boring and ill-rewarded as it had often proved to be — to become her second-in-command and the so-called “Captain” of The Ark. Gerry — in one of her rare, very rare, melting moods could certainly wear a fellow down and Tommy had begun to suspect that where Gerry Carlyle was concerned he was sometimes not quite bright — a thought he kept very much to himself. Anyway he had made his bargain-even if it had been when he had been completely dazzled — and he was too stubborn now to admit that he should have waited a little before he mortgaged his future. At any rate-if Gerry thought that he was going to be one of her “yes men,” she was very much mistaken.

Just then the office door slid noiselessly open, and all activity was automatically suspended as a young woman entered. One with a mind of her own to judge by her firm chin and high-tempered arch of nostril.

Her presence in the office brought an elusive suggestion of far-away places and unfamiliar, romantic things—a breath of the thin, dry wind that combs the deserts of Mars, a faint memory of the spicy scents that throng Venus' eternal mists.

“Tommy!” Gerry snapped. “That’ll be enough! This is the New York office of the London Interplanetary Zoo, and was not designed for brawling. Now what’s it all about?”

Strike pointed at the visitor.

“This crazy inventor crashed in here with his box full of junk, acting mysterious and refusing to tell me what it’s for. Then all of a sudden he turned the darned thing on me and my legs went out from under me — ‘

“Oh, my. My, no. Not a crazy inventor. I am Professor Lunde, head of the department of physics at Plymouth University.”

“Oh!” There was a wealth of intolerant scorn in Strike’s voice, and he glanced significantly at Gerry. Lunde was well known as an overly self-important and doddering old fool many years past his prime. He had contributed nothing to advance physical research for ten years, hanging on at Plymouth by virtue of decades-old triumphs.

But, surprisingly, Gerry nodded.

“Sit down, Professor.” Turning to Strike, she explained, “Professor Lunde has been sending me a letter each day for the past week, cryptically reminding me that Rod Shipkey’s broadcast tonight would be of interest to me. Very intriguing.”

Lunde’s cheeks became shiny red apples. “Er—I must apologize for the melodramatic manner in which your attention was solicited. My assistant’s idea, really. Trevelyan is invaluable. Ambitious lad. He felt a woman in your position could not be reached under ordinary circumstances. But my daughter-in-law works for Mr. Shipkey, and, well, we got wind of tonight’s broadcast. I’d rather not explain the purpose of my visit until after you’ve heard Mr. Shipkey, if you

please. He's on now."

Strike moved across the room to the television set, careful to keep out of range of Lunde's funny box. He snapped the switch just in time to catch the program highlight.

The image of Rod Shipkey appeared. He spoke with the easy smoothness that characterized this veteran explorer and newsman's delivery.

"...and now for our 'Five-Star Believe-This-If-You-Can of Space.' Around the largest of our planets, Jupiter, a whole host of satellites of varying sizes are slung in their orbits, tied by the invisible cord of gravity. The closest of these- paradoxically known as Satellite Five because it wasn't discovered until after some of the larger ones-is a tiny bit of rock less than two hundred miles in diameter. It circles its primary some 112,600 miles away, hurtling like a cannonball around Jupiter in less than twelve hours. Incredible to think there might be anything on that barren and useless ball of stone dangerous or even interesting to Man, lord of the Universe.

"And yet-believe this if you can!-on Satellite Five there is a strange form of life which has defied all efforts to kill or catalogue it. No man has ever set foot on Satellite Five and returned alive!"

"There are three authenticated records of space-masters who, either by choice or force of circumstance, landed their craft on Five. None has ever been heard from again. One of these cases was an expedition especially equipped to take care of itself under any conditions. It was the spaceship and crew of Jan Ebers, famous Dutch hunter of extraterrestrial lifeforms, one of the earliest pioneers in that romantic and dangerous business now epitomized by the greatest of them all-our own Gerry Carlyle.

"What this strange creature, so inimical, may be, we can only conjecture, aided by fragmentary notes of space fairers who passed briefly in proximity to Satellite Five, and by telescopic observations from Io, the next Jovian satellite outward. These give us a curious picture. Four things we can say about it. The thing is somewhat saurian or wormlike in appearance, low on the evolutionary scale. It seems to be of a sluggish nature, which would be natural considering what a limited supply of energy-building food elements there must be on Five. Not more than one has ever been seen at a given time. And-believe this if you can!

The monster breathes fire! Literally!”

Gerry and Strike exchanged tolerant smiles. They had seen a lot of incredible things, but a fire-breathing monster would require a good deal of seeing to believe.

“...have precedent for this phenomena,” Shipkey was saying, “in classic mythology. Cacus, from Vergil’s Aeneid, spouted fire... Here an attendant stepped into view with an artist’s conception of Cacus, the half-man, half-beast slain by Hercules.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, time’s a-flyin’. Which is just as well, for there’s not much more we can say about our mysterious fire-demon, the Cacus. Safe it is to say that Man, with his insatiable curiosity, will not long let this remain a mystery. Someone with courage and the proper facilities will dare death once again, and tear out the black heart of the secret that shrouds Satellite Five. Indeed, it’s a surprise to me that the inimitable Carlyle has not already done so. Can it possibly be that at last there’s something in the Universe that blonde daredevil hesitates to tackle? Believe that, ladies and gentlemen, if you can!”

The too-handsome announcer with his too-suave voice slipped deftly into focus, saying dulcetly, “This is WZQZ, bringing you Rod Shipkey with the compliments of Tootsie-Tonic, that gentle — ‘ The screen went dead.

Strike looked across at Gerry in surprise.

“I bought one of those gadgets yesterday that automatically turns off the radio when the commercials begin,” she explained. “All right, Professor Lunde. We’ve played ball with you. We’ve granted you an interview, listened to Shipkey. Now let’s have a look at a brass tack or two.”

Lunde hitched himself forward earnestly.

“I have invented a weapon, Miss Carlyle, that will render the monster on Satellite Five helpless!” he proclaimed dramatically. “A paralysis ray!”

Gerry was dubious. She had seen abortive attempts at paralysis rays before.

“What’s the principle?” she asked.

Lunde removed his glasses and used them to tap his fingers and gesture with as he broke into a classroom lecture.

“The transmission of a nerve impulse along the nerve fiber is provided by local electrical currents within the fiber itself. But the transmission of a state of activity from one nerve fiber to another, as happens in the brain when sense organs are stimulated, or from a nerve fiber to a muscle fiber, as happens in voluntary movement, means transmission of excitation from one cell to another.

“Passage over the junction point between cells is effected by a chemical transmitter, acetylcholine. Every voluntary or involuntary movement is accompanied by the production of minute amounts of acetylcholine at the ends of nerve fibers, and it is through this chemical agent that the muscle is set into action.”

Tommy Strike stirred.

“Old stuff, Doc. Sir Henry Dale and Professor Otto Loewi won the Nobel Prize for physiology and medicine for that discovery sixty-seventy years ago. Nineteen-thirty-six, wasn't it?”

Lunde seemed vaguely annoyed by this display of erudition.

“Well!” Professor Lunde was resuming. “The acetylcholine is very unstable, and breaks down into other chemicals as soon as its function is completed. There is a disease known as myasthenia gravis, characterized by muscle weakness, in which there is too-rapid destruction of acetylcholine. Now, if a device could be built which would decompose acetylcholine as fast as it is produced within the body-you see? The muscles would be unable to receive nerve impulses, unable to act. Paralysis!”

Lunde now exposed the interior of the leaden-colored box which had caused Strike such distress earlier. The interior showed a bewildering array of tubes and coils, all in miniature; there was also a portable power unit attached. The lens was shutterlike, similar to a camera lens. It appeared extremely simple to operate.

“This, in effect,” went on Professor Lunde in lecture style, “produces a neutron stream. We decided against a stream of electrons, because they lack sufficient momentum; protons, too, can be deflected. But neutrons react with atoms at low

energies. And the penetrating neutron blast destroys the acetylcholine by adding to its atomic structure, thus making it so extremely unstable that it breaks itself up at once. It does not harm blood or lymph or bodily tissues because they are essentially stable combinations, whereas acetylcholine is not.”

“Say! That makes sense! And I can testify the blasted outfit sure works! That means we can take a crack at this Cacus jigger on Satellite Five and show Shipkey up for a dope! How about it, Gerry? Let’s go!”

Gerry shook her head.

“Impossible, Tommy, and you know it. I have lecture commitments three weeks ahead, conferences with Kent on the autobiography, business appointments, a hundred and one things to do. No, the Jupiter trip’ll have to wait. Sorry, Tommy... .” Then Gerry’s voice turned poisonously sweet. “Besides, I have to run up to Hollywood on the Moon day after tomorrow. Special occasion at the Silver Spacesuit. Henri, the maitre d’hotel, is naming a sandwich after me. A double-decker: hardboiled egg and ham!”

“Yow!” Strike convulsed with delight, with one wary eye on Gerry as if half expecting a missile. “That’s good. Y’know whose idea that is?”

“Certainly. Nine Planets Pictures runs the Moon as they please, and this is that chimpanzee Von Zorn’s idea of humor. He put Henri up to it. But boy-will I make a speech that’ll singe his ears!”

But Tommy wasn’t to be put off by changing the subject; he was like a small boy at prospect of a fishing trip. “All right; you can’t go. But nobody wants to take my picture or get my autograph. I’m not tied down here. Besides, I’m sick of sitting around. There isn’t a reason in the world why I couldn’t round up the crew and take The Ark myself!”

“I remember the last time you started out alone! On Venus. Remember the lost continent?”

Tommy Strike brushed that aside.

“That was different. This’ll be a cinch with The Ark’s equipment and Lunde’s ray and all the gang — ‘

“Well — ‘ Gerry was weakening. “Might be arranged. Before we decide on anything definitely, though, there’re three things I’d like to ask Professor Lunde.”

“Yes, Miss Carlyle?”

“First, have you tried your ray on extraterrestrial animals?”

“Oh, yes, indeed. The curator of the local zoo permitted experiments on several Martian and Venusian specimens. All creatures of our Universe, it seems, transmit nerve impulses with the aid of acetylcholine. Provided this-this Cacus is not a vegetable, I’m sure the ray will work on him, too.”

“All right. Secondly, what’s in this for you? Not money. Even if we found the ray practicable, you couldn’t manufacture it for general distribution because your only market would be hunters like myself who wish to capture live specimens.”

Lunde put on a vague dignity.

“Prestige, miss, is my sole motive. Prestige for Plymouth University and its faculty.”

“I see. And now tell me who put you up to this?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I mean whose idea was it to write me notes about the Shipkey broadcast and so on? You’re just not the type.”

“Er-no. Not entirely my idea. Trevelyan’s, really. He’s my assistant, or did I tell you that before? Smart lad — ‘

“Very well, Professor Lunde.” Gerry cut the interview off abruptly. “You’ve been very entertaining. My secretary’ll give you a written authorization to install your apparatus in The Ark. We may be able to give it a trial.”

As soon as Lunde had left Gerry immediately snapped open a circuit on the inter-office communicator.

“Barney Galt? You and your partner come right in.”

Two men promptly entered through another door. Galt was tall and lean with a face like a good-natured chow dog. His partner was a nondescript man of middle age. Both were old-time policemen, retired from public duty to act as private investigators for Gerry Carlyle. She wasn't a woman to bother with bodyguards, but a woman in her position is besieged with all sorts of threats, rackets, fraudulent charities and fantastic schemes; Galt invariably discovered the good among the bad.

"Fellow named Lunde just left here, a little gray-haired chap with a bundle under his arm. Follow him, make a complete check. Don't interfere with anything he may do; just report anything phony."

The two detectives saluted casually and left on their unobtrusive mission. Strike snorted.

"Why set those bloodhounds on Lunde's tail? He's all right. A bit of an old fool who has stumbled on something good, but too dumb to be anything but honest."

"Just routine, Tommy. I don't think there's anything wrong with Lunde. Just a hunch. If he gets a clean bill of health, you can take The Ark and go."

"Woman's intuition again?" Strike spoke with tolerant condescension.

"So what if it is? Tommy, I take lots more precautions than this when I sign the lowliest member of my crew for a dangerous expedition. No doubt Lunde is all he appears, and I know you can take care of yourself, but you can't blame me for wanting to make sure when it concerns the man I love."

They grinned at each other.

"Okay, fluff. Snoop around while I rout the crew out of their sinful pleasures and provision the ship. That'll take several hours; you'll know by then everything's on the up and up. Call me as soon as Galt okays Lunde, because Jupiter's nearing conjunction and I want to take off as soon as possible. Bye."

Chapter X. Flight of The Ark

Events marched swiftly on their silent feet, moving inevitably into place in the strange pattern that spelt disaster. Tommy Strike was busy over radio and telephone, giving forth the rallying cry that brought the seasoned veterans of The

Ark rushing from all corners, dropping unfinished business or pleasures at once to get to the spaceport in time to blast off on another adventurous journey. They'd tell you, those tough space-hounds, that Gerry Carlyle's expeditions were nothing but iron discipline and hardships with sudden death waiting to pounce on the unwary; but you couldn't bribe one of them with love or money to give up his berth on the famous ship.

At the landing field itself, under the blazing carbon dioxide lamps, a small man drove up in a surface car, showed an authorization to the guard, passed into the burglar-proof enclosure. He carried a bundle to The Ark, again showed his pass, and went inside. He came out before long empty-handed.

Gerry Carlyle worked without cessation in her office, while outside the city's lights went out one by one, and the muted torrent of traffic in the canyons of the city street grew thinner and thinner, dwindling away to trickles. Presently a light flashed above the door to the outer office. Someone wanted admittance. Gerry slid a heatray pistol into plain sight, then tripped the foot-switch which unlocked the door.

"Come in!" she cried.

It was Barney Galt. One hand bulged suggestively in his coat pocket. Before him, registering bewildered indignation, walked a short, stocky chap of about thirty, with bold, dark eyes. He strode aggressively up to Gerry.

"I demand to know the meaning of this outrage!" he said. "Your-your hireling here has held me up at the point of a gun, without authority, and forced me to come to this office against my will. That's abduction, and I'll see this gangster go to the disintegrator chamber for it!"

Gerry looked questioningly at Galt, who grinned faintly.

"My buddy's still on Lunde's tail. We split when we seen this monkey come out o' the prof's place. He's the assistant, Trevelyan, an' he looks an awful lot like a bird we picked up ten-fifteen years ago for delinquency." Galt was famous for his memory. "Anyhow, he took the stuff to The Ark and installed it. Left instructions on how to work it, then beat it. I had the spaceport guards hang onto him while I sniffed around. Miss Carlyle, the junk he put into The Ark wouldn't paralyze a beetle! It's fake! I tried it!"

Trevelyan sneered.

“You just couldn’t puzzle out how to work it, that’s all. I demonstrated it to a couple of the crew there. They’ll tell you it was left in perfect shape. I demand ___”

“Shut up, you.” Gerry’s voice was like a mallet. The paralysis ray had been extremely simple to operate; Galt could have managed it easily. Gerry remembered her vague suspicions at Lunde’s carefully arranged build-up, how he insisted on a certain order of events, Shipkey’s broadcast first, then his apparatus, all designed to intrigue her interest.

It now seemed rehearsed, a routine entirely foreign to Lunde’s vacillating character. And there had been the misty figure of the assistant in the background, “clever” and “ambitious” Trevelyan, the motivating force behind the innocuous Professor Lunde. There was something off-color here.

“Then you wouldn’t mind if we went back, picked up Lunde, and tried the apparatus again?”

Trevelyan shifted uneasily.

“Why not? Of course, the assembly is delicate, and the ray machine can easily be jarred out of kilter.”

“So that’s what you did! After the test, you knocked one of the parts haywire so your superior would be blamed for sending people out to risk their lives with apparatus so delicately and unsubstantially built that it won’t even last through an ordinary testing. Why?”

“You’re crazy, lady! I didn’t do anything! I just installed the stuff Lunde told me to install. If it’s broken down already, that’s not my fault!” He suddenly twisted free of Galt’s grip. “I insist you allow me to go, or else suffer the consequences before the law!”

Silence, then, while Gerry pondered. Finally she looked at Galt.

“Well, Barney, what does your detective instinct dictate?”

Galt laughed shortly.

“Police methods ain’t changed much in fifty years, Miss Carlyle. When we used t’ want to find out things in a hurry, we persuaded people t’ tell us.”

“You mean scopolamine-the truth serum?”

“No, ma’am. That ain’t always reliable. We used to use a rubber hose ‘cause it didn’t leave no marks. Science has give us gadgets like the psycho-probe that beat the old hose all hollow. They don’t leave no marks, either, but they sure get the truth out of a man.”

Trevelyan’s eyes held a horrified look of dawning comprehension.

“You can’t third-degree me” he shouted. “It’s unlawful! I won’t —”

Galt clapped his powerful fingers across the man’s mouth.

“Okay by you, Miss Carlyle?”

Gerry nodded. She was a woman who had lived with blood and death and wasn’t the one to quail before a little necessary brutality. When there might be lives at stake, the lives of her own men, she could be as Hard as any man.

“Shoot the works, Barney. We’ll use the back office. The walls are Vacuum-Brik with mineral fluff insulation, so we won’t disturb anyone. And don’t worry about the law. If anything happens, all the influence of the London Interplanetary Zoo will back you up.”

Galt grinned ominously at the trembling Trevelyan.

“My buddy’ll have a hemorrhage when he finds out what he missed!” And they grimly forced Trevelyan into the tiny inner room, locked the door behind.

It was mid-morning when those three staggered out of that little black chamber. Galt and Gerry Carlyle were drawn and haggard, red-eyed from lack of sleep, grim-faced from the things they had had to do to break Trevelyan down. Trevelyan himself could scarcely stand. There was not a mark on his body; physically he was unharmed. Trevelyan had been a tough nut to crack, but Galt had done it. They had the story. The end had justified the means.

It wasn’t a pleasant tale to hear—a recounting of ugly passion, jealousy, treachery,

hate. Under the American university system, for fifty years increasingly the centers of ultra-conservatism and reactionary tendencies, Trevelyan, in common with many underlings, had had no chance to express his own theories or receive credit for his own calculations and inventions. The silly and unjust ruling that required all papers to be published-and all discoveries to be announced-by the department heads only, regardless of who in the department might have been responsible, had stifled Trevelyan's restless soul too long. He couldn't stand by and see fools like Lunde take credit for scientific advances with which they had nothing to do. It galled him.

So he had planned to discredit Lunde completely, have him ousted, and take what he felt was his rightful place as professor of physics at Plymouth University. If someone as famous as Gerry Carlyle tried out a Lunde "invention" and found it a failure, with probable loss of life, public indignation would ruin him. Then Trevelyan, turning up with the genuine paralysis ray and a story of Lunde's blind stupidity and the fact that he had refused to take advice from subordinates, would easily ride into office. So he had egged the professor, into saddling Gerry with the paralysis ray.

The only thing Trevelyan didn't foresee was meeting an old-time copper like Barney Galt, who wouldn't hesitate to go any length to wrest the truth from a man he suspected.

Gerry picked up a visiphone and called the spaceport.

"Put Mr. Strike on, please," she asked the attendant who appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Strike, miss? I'm sorry. He left with The Ark for Jupiter at eight o'clock this morning."

"For Jupiter!" she cried. "That's impossible. He promised to wait until I okayed everything!"

"Well, miss, Mr. Strike and the crew were all ready to leave several hours ago. He became impatient and tried to get in touch with you two or three times. Finally I heard him say everything must be all right and you'd gone home to bed, and anyhow he wasn't going to wait while some er — "

"I know. 'While some woman spoiled his fun.' Go on from there."

“Uh-exactly, miss. While some woman stalled around thinking up excuses to spoil the trip. And off he went.” The attendant’s face twisted slightly but remained heroically stolid.

“All right. Don’t stand there like a dummy!” Gerry snapped. “Plug me into the radio communications bureau!” Once the connection was made, she told the operator to get in touch with The Ark at once. Minutes passed. At intervals the operator cut in to say,

“Sorry, Miss Carlyle. The Ark does not answer. We’ll keep trying.”

After ten minutes of this, Gerry suggested they call some other ship nearby and have her contact The Ark.

“We’ve already done so, Miss Carlyle. The Martian freighter Phobos is in the same sector as The Ark. The Phobos’ signals are not answered, either.”

Gerry hung up abruptly as comprehension dawned on her.

“That louse Trevelyan!” she cried aloud, wishing momentarily Galt hadn’t taken the fellow away so she’d have something more satisfying than the desk to pound. “He wrecked the radio receiver, too. If Tommy tests the ray apparatus before reaching Jupiter, that reckless guy will be so far along on the trip that he won’t want to come back.”

Quickly Gerry got busy on the phone, calling the major spaceports of the Earth, asking the same question over and over:

“When does your next ship leave for the vicinity of Jupiter?”

Luck was against her. Every passenger clipper in service was either out along the spaceways or undergoing repairs. Frantically, then, Gerry got in touch with those private concerns that had ships comparable in speed and power to The Ark. There were only a few—one or two utility companies, the big exploitation concerns. Again she failed. Sudden fear loosed ice in her veins. The fact had to be faced: nowhere on Earth was there a ship available to overtake Tommy.

Gerry wasted no tears over spilt milk. She did the next best thing, buying passage at a fabulous price on a fast freighter leaving for Ganymede within the hour. She barely had time to see Lunde and explain what had happened, bully

him into parting with the only remaining model of the paralysis ray — a miniature low-power set for small-scale experimentation — rush to the port in an air-taxi and dash through the freighter's airlock ten seconds before deadline.

Only when she was safely ensconced in one of the foul-smelling holes these freight lines used for cabins was Gerry able to relax and give vent to a wholehearted blistering of every one and everything connected with this ghastly game.

Chapter XI. Outpost of Forgotten Men

On Ganymede, fourth satellite outward from Jupiter, is the strangest community in the System, the center, in a way, of the vast mining activities that go on throughout practically every Jovian satellite, except Five, large and small.

It would be impractical for the freighters which periodically bring supplies and take away the accumulated ores and concentrates to make the rounds of each individual satellite, scattered about Jupiter in different positions as they are. So a single base was established on Ganymede. Earth freighters stop only there to leave supplies and equipment; and all shipments are brought to the Ganymede depot by a local transport system.

And the pilots of these local transport ships compose this unique village. Not ordinary pilots, these men and women, but the toughest, most bard-bitten crew of rocket-busters who ever spat into the teeth of Death herself. Gutter scrapings, many of them, society's outcasts—men with ugly blots on their records such as drunkenness on duty that cost the lives of passengers—criminals, murderers.

There is a reason for this: the job these people do requires that they take their lives in their hands every time they leave the rocky soil of Ganymede. The terrible iron fingers of Jupiter's gravity threaten every instant to drag their puny ships down, down, to plummet into the heart of that pseudo-sun. Great magnetic storms tower high above the limits of Jovian atmosphere, the slightest breath of which would ruin the firing system of a rocket ship and leave it to spin disabled to destruction. Unrelaxing vigilance and incredible reserves of fuel is the price of survival.

Wages are high here, but none but those who have little to live for consider the job. The law shuts its eye to criminals who take refuge there, because they are doing valuable work. Besides, just as surely as if they had been sentenced in a

tribunal of law, they are men and women condemned.

Yet this lonely outpost with its heavy-fisted, bragging, hard-drinking ruffians held Gerry Carlyle's only hope of reaching Strike in time to help him. When, after several restless days and sleepless nights during which the so-called "fast freight" seemed to crawl among the stars, it finally reached Ganymede, Gerry was first out of the ship. The place was unprepossessing, simply a barren landing field pitted and scarred from rocket blasts. The thin air was bitterly cold, and ugly yellow Jupiter-glow lighted the scene badly.

While the crew unloaded the cargo, Gerry turned to a young under-officer.

"Looks like this place was wiped out by the plague. Where is everyone?"

The officer smiled.

"Pretty self-important bunch, these bums. Act as if they were lords of creation and us ordinary mortals are only born to cater to their vanity. Here come a few of them now."

There was a cluster of three or four barracks in the near distance. Out of the most pretentious of them, a half dozen sauntered casually. They were hard-faced, dressed in furs.

The officer met them halfway.

"Got a passenger for you this time. Wants to see your chief."

One of the pilots, a huge hulk of a fellow, grinned.

"You don't say! We ain't got any chief. We're all equals here; everybody's just as good as everybody else."

The freighter officer bit his lip indecisively, but before he could speak, Gerry's temper slipped its leash a trifle.

"Nonsense!" she cried sharply. "A blind man could see that you and this bunch of down-at-heel underlings aren't equal to anything. You must have a leader, someone to tell you what to do. Without a chief you wouldn't know enough to come in out of a meteor shower!"

There was dumfounded silence as the pilots all gathered close for a good view of this phenomenon.

“Well, split my rockettubes if I ain’t seen her on the news!” one woman exploded.

“I’m Gerry Carlyle,” she announced imperiously, “and I’m in a very great hurry. I insist upon seeing your chief at once!”

The giant opened his mouth to bellow in Gerry’s face, but something changed his mind at the last instant. He shut his mouth, scratched his chin in bewilderment.

“Maybe we better let Frenchy figure this one out,” one of the others suggested.

There was general assent, and the party moved across the field to the pilots’ living quarters. A blast of warm air struck their faces as the door opened, and everyone shucked off his furs. There were four more women and men inside and one of them, a man with black spade beard and dark, flashing eyes, was obviously French.

“Hey, Frenchy, there was a passenger landed today,” the big man said.

The Frenchman was busy with something in his hands and did not look up.

“So, my good Bullwer? And this passenger, what is it that he wishes?”

“Wants to see our chief. Ain’t that a laugh?” Bullwer looked around and saw it was no laugh. It was obvious everyone in that room accepted the mild-looking little Frenchman as nominal leader.

The latter looked up, handling Bullwer with his eyes. “So you bring this passenger to see Louis Duval, is it not?” Bullwer squirmed.

“Okay. No need to get sore. The passenger’s here, but it’s just a dame.”

Duval looked around, startled, saw Gerry. For a moment of breathless silence he stared as if it had been given to him to see a vision. Then he sprang to his feet.

“A dame, yes!” he breathed. “But a dame of the most magnificent, is it not?”

Louis Duval, Mademoiselle, at your service!” And he bowed low over Gerry’s hand.

Suddenly Duval glared about him.

“Swine!” he roared. “Take off your hats! A chair for the lady! Refreshments! Vite! Vite!”

But Gerry was not to be swerved from her purpose.

“Monsieur Duval,” she said tensely, “I’m here for a reason. Every minute that passes may mean the difference between life and death to many men. I must, at the earliest possible moment, get to Satellite Five. The only men and women in the System with the courage and skill to get me there in time are right in this room. Will you aid me?”

The pilots, who had lounged about in interested silence while Duval held the floor, now burst into concerted, ironic laughter.

“The dame don’t want much,” one said. “Just a mass suicide!”

“Satellite Five!” ejaculated a second. “There ain’t two dozen ships in the System could make Five. And they ain’t none of em anywheres near this dump of a Ganymede!”

Duval’s eyes darkened with genuine regret.

“Mademoiselle,” he declared earnestly, “there is nothing on this world or any world we would not do for you gladly-if it can be done. But the journey to Satellite Five-it is not possible.”

He took Gerry gently by the arm, led her to a window.

“Look. There is one of the vehicles so splendid in which we make our trips regular to the other satellites.”

Gerry stared. The ship was an ancient iron hull. Its rocket exhausts were badly corroded; the plates were warped and buckled, roughened by the relentless pelting of thousands of wandering meteorites. A far cry from The Ark’s streamlined power which would take it anywhere in the System.

“That wreck!” Gerry ejaculated. “Why that’s a condemned crate if I ever saw one! That thing wouldn’t last thirty minutes in space! It’d fall apart!”

“Frequently they do fall apart, Mademoiselle. For example, Scoffino is two days overdue from Io. Soon we will drink the toast.”

Gerry’s eyes followed Duval’s to a shelf which ran across the rear of the room. On it were ranged a row of shattered goblets; etched in acid across each was a name.

“Great heavens!” Gerry was indignant. “That’s criminal!”

“But no one can blame the company. They would be very foolish to risk ships valuable, costing many thousands of dollars, on these routes hazardous. Besides, there is genius — I, Duval, admit it-among the mechanics. They continue to patch and to patch and somehow most of us we manage to return alive with our cargoes. But to journey to Five — ‘ Duval hunched his shoulders in the inimitable shrug with which a Frenchman can express so little or so much.

Something rose suddenly in Gerry’s throat, chokingly. Was it to be failure this time? And what about Tommy Strike, facing some alien horror with empty weapons? He was so quixotically reckless that he would never consent to turn tail and flee, even when his own life was in danger. Was he, too, to die with succor so near at hand because she couldn’t dig up transportation to bridge a little gap of a few hundred thousand miles of space?

Not while the strongest in Gerry’s arsenal of weapons was yet unused. She had a hypodermic tongue, and the knack of injecting caustic, rankling remarks. She whirled on the group of lounging pilots, fire in her eye.

“That’s a laugh!” she cried in piercing tones. “That’s a real laugh! My fiance is down there on Satellite Five right now, fighting it out with some monstrous thing no man has ever seen ‘to tell of. There’s nothing the matter with his insides; he’s got what it takes. But because of a scheming rat back in New York, he’s out there defenseless with a weapon that won’t work. I have the real one, and I came to the only place in the entire System where I could find men and women supposedly with the skill and guts to pilot me to Satellite Five.

“And what do I find? A bunch of no-good tramps, half-baked defeatists playing cribbage for matches! Telling each other how tough they really are, living

perpetually in the shadow of death! Dramatizing themselves! Breaking a two-bit goblet every time one of their worthless carcasses takes a dive into Jupiter—the cheapest kind of theatrics! If the whole lot of you were laid end to end, it would be a darned good job! All told, you couldn't muster up the courage of a sick rabbit!"

It was a cruel, bitter indictment, completely unjust; but it was the last trump in Gerry's hand. If it failed to take the trick, she was through. With a final sweeping glance of unutterable scorn, she strode out of the barracks and slammed the door behind her.

There was thick silence in the pilots' quarters after Gerry left, broken finally by sheepish stirrings and a muttered, "Whew!"

Of all the people gathered there, Gerry's denunciation affected Duval most poignantly. He had all the Frenchman's traditional romanticism and chivalry and love of beauty. For three seemingly endless years he had been a lonely exile on Ganymede, far from the beloved Gascony of his birth.

Paris was a dim memory; he had not seen a cultured woman in years.

All the ideals in his romantic soul had become magnified to an unnatural extent. Despite the fact that he dominated this hardy crew, he was a misfit. By nature he was cut out to be a reincarnation of the chevalier Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*; cruel circumstance had made him — what he was. And now this flame of a young woman had poured salt on his wounds. Boy and girl in love, and in need. It meant everything such a situation means to any Frenchman, a hundred times keener. And he with opportunity to make his worthless life meaningful again.

Purposefully Duval strode to a cupboard, yanked out a handful of charts, pored over them. He sat down with pencil and calculator, muttering to himself, figuring.

"Name of a pipe," he whispered presently. "It might be done."

Duval hurried out after Gerry and found her by the freighter, which was now taking on its load of ore concentrates, trying bitterly and hopelessly to argue its commander into attempting to make Satellite Five.

“Mademoiselle!” called Duval breathlessly. “Mademoiselle, I believe there is a possibility of the faintest —”

“Duval!” Gerry cried, her face lighting like a torch from within. “You mean you’ll try it? Oh, that’s marvelous! And I’ll see you’re properly rewarded, too. I have influence. Plenty. I don’t know what you did back home, but if it can be fixed —”

Duval brushed this aside.

“We have perhaps one chance in the hundred to arrive safely. After that is time to talk of the rewarding. Fortunately, the Satellite Five is almost directly opposite Ganymede, on the other side of Jupiter —”

They were moving rapidly across the field tarmac toward the battered rocket ship in its starting cradle, Duval’s feet fairly twinkling to match Gerry’s eager strides. The paralysis ray swung at her side. She nodded incisively.

“I see what you mean. We dive straight into the heart of Jupiter to gather terrific momentum, then cut over in a hump and utilize our speed to draw clear and make our objective. Splendid! I knew there must be some rocket-buster around here with the stuff to make this trip.”

Duval beamed.

“You are willing to risk the life with me?”

“Perfectly.”

Drawn by curiosity, some of the pilots drifted around as Duval made a swift final check-up before taking off. A few, a bit embarrassed by anything like a display of emotion, diffidently shook the Frenchman’s hand in a manner clearly indicating they never expected to see him again. Just before they scaled the entrance port, Bullwer poked his head inside.

“Say! You really gonna shoot for V, Frenchy?” he asked incredulously.

Duval drew himself up to every inch of his five feet. “And why not? If there is anyone who can it achieve, I, Duval, am he, is it not?”

Bullwer grinned.

“Maybe so. But I’ll lay a week’s pay you can’t.”

“Done!” And Duval slammed the port shut, nearly decapitating Bullwer. Flames spewed from the rockettubes in tenuous streamers along the ground; thunder shook the ship. Scarcely waiting for the motors to warm up properly, Duval poured on the power, and the strangely assorted couple took off on perhaps the most hazardous journey in the history of rocketry.

Chapter XII. Re-birth

Gerry always remembered that trip with the breathless terror of a nightmare. Once in the ship, there was no time to adjust herself to the danger, none of the usual hours of preparation, of preliminary approach, during which one can screw up courage to the sticking point. Instead, one instant the clang of the port was ringing in her ears, the next, the booming of the engines, and all at once they were dropping like a plummet straight into the maw of the gigantic golden bubble of Jupiter, which burgeoned before them like a mighty blossom of disaster.

Duval was a grim figure strapped in the pilot’s seat, his magic hands flying over the control board, delicately probing, guiding the old cracker-box ship miraculously, wary of indications of Jovian magnetic storms which would mean destruction for them. Completely ignoring the physical effects of acceleration, Duval soon had the rocket ship hurtling down at speeds she had never achieved before, and for which she was never built.

Soon the sinister, swirling globe of Jupiter filled every corner of the visi-screen. Duval spoke sharply without turning his head.

“The straps, Mademoiselle! Make certain they are tight! Soon we must make our move!”

Gerry set her teeth grimly, watching with almost impersonal admiration the skill of Duval. Too late to turn back now; already a faint scream was audible as they bulleted through the extreme upper reaches of the Jovian atmosphere. Then Duval’s fingers plunged downward on the firing keys, and the underrockets flowered crimson petals of flame.

The ship lurched, groaned hideously in every joint as if in some strange cosmic labor, striving to tear itself free. Instantly the steely fingers of Jupiter's gravity wrenched powerfully at the ancient hull. Seams squealed, ripping open as the rivets sprung; the plates twisted tortuously under the unprecedented strains. Air pressure dropped as the precious mixture whistled out through a dozen tiny vents. The obsolete air-o-stat pumped valiantly in a grim losing battle.

Temperature suddenly rose, rapidly becoming intolerable as the outer air became thicker and friction heated the hull. Sweat poured into Gerry's eyes, but she maintained her stoic calm.

The picture of Jupiter on the visi-screen was shifting erratically; a matter of a few seconds would tell the story... .

They made it. Their incredible velocity defeated the greedy powers of Jovian gravity. One final burst in which the rockettube flames burst completely around the ship's nose, obscuring everything, and they had cleared the "hump," missed the surface of Jupiter cleanly and burst through the layers of upper atmosphere into open space again. Ahead, moving round to its assignment with the ship, was Satellite Five, barren and bright in the Jupiter-glow.

The rest was comparatively simple. Jupiter's gravity still had a strong claim on them; it was as if they were chained to the giant planet by a cosmic rubber band, which tightened inexorably the further they coasted away. Handling this mighty force with dexterity, Duval jockeyed the ship so it was barely moving when it reached the appointed spot in space. They came to rest with a jar that completed the wrecking of the ship, but they were safe.

Gerry took Duval's hand and squeezed hard.

"You were magnificent, Duval; I'll never forget it. But now we've got work to do. Ready?"

They piled into spacesuits, Gerry seized the paralysis equipment, and the two left the wreckage. There was nothing moving in sight on the fairly level plane, spawled off by Jupiter's fierce heat when the System was young, whose horizon was a scant mile away. So they started walking. Gravitation was surprisingly strong, indicating unusual density. This fact, plus the intense cold which slows down the dance of the atoms, accounted for the fact that Five still retained remnants of an atmosphere.

The hikers even saw traces of water vapor, in form of frost. Occasionally they passed clumps of mossy or lichenous growth. Twice they observed colonies of sluglike creatures growing, reproducing, and dying with amazing rapidity. And then, like an enormous silver cigar looming over the horizon, The Ark came into view. It looked almost as large as the Satellite itself, and there was furious activity going on. A half-dozen suited figures scurried about the nose of The Ark. From the pilot house another figure was throwing out instruments to those below.

Gerry and Duval drew quickly near, and she shouted into her head-set, "Hey. Tommy! Tommy Strike!"

All the moving figures turned sharply, in varying attitudes of astonishment. Then one of them gestured sharply and came lumbering over the plain as fast as possible.

As the two from Ganymede moved forward, Duval tripped and sprawled ludicrously, though harmlessly, on his face. He scrambled carefully to his feet and bent over to see what had caused his humiliation. He uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Name of a pipe! What a monster of the most incredible!"

Gerry, too, stopped to examine the thing stretched out on the rocky ground. It was something beyond even Gerry's vast experience in extraterrestrial life. From tip to tip it might have measured as much as twenty feet, and its ugly, warty gray hide was divided into armored sections along its entire length with soft spots between the plates. It was oval-shaped in lateral cross-section, something like a gigantic cut-worm that has been stepped upon but not quite squashed. Duval was for leaving the nauseous horror strictly alone.

Gerry's clinical instinct, however, prompted her to turn it over with her foot. About a fourth of the way along the under side were six short legs, arranged with no particular symmetry, just stuck here and there. Sprouting about the front end of the thing was a forest of what looked like dead gloved fingers-sensory organs of some kind. The mouth parts resembled a funnel, much like the proboscis of the common house-fly. Two eyes set on either side of the head were glazed in death. While the entire lower half of the abdomen was slit wide open; inside was nothing but a sickening mess of half-devoured vitals.

At that moment Tommy Strike finally galloped up, spluttering.

“Gerry! How the dickens did you ever manage to get here? And why? And —”

“Never mind all that!” interrupted Gerry. “Duval here brought me from Ganymede by rocket. He’s the greatest pilot in the System. And I came because the paralysis ray equipment you have is no good.”

“No kidding!” Strike was bitterly sarcastic. “You came a long ways just to tell us that. We found it out a few hours ago. It cost us two lives. Leeds and Machen are gone, burned to cinders.”

“Burned!” Gerry rocked back on her heels, stunned at the loss. “Then this-this Cacus really does breathe fire?”

“And how it does! You’ve never seen anything like it. But what I want to know is about the ray apparatus. What — ‘

Gerry quickly explained about Trevelyan’s treachery. “I have the genuine article with me now.” She displayed Lunde’s other model.

Strike seized it avidly.

“Then let me have it! Will we give that monkey what-for!”

“But wait a minute, Tommy. What about this thing here?” She kicked at the empty dead thing at their feet. “Is this the Cacus?”

“Well, it was the Cacus.” Strike looked a bit befuddled. “Though now the Cacus has helped itself to The Ark. Just walked in and took over. The pilot-house and engine rooms are locked, keeping it out of there, but the boys trapped in the nose of the ship are jettisoning the valuable stuff in case the Cacus decides to burn its way in there.” He swore. “It’s a mess!”

Gerry shook her head.

“Then you mean there’s more than one Cacus; you killed this one, but another showed up. That it?”

“No, that isn’t it! There’s only one Cacus. It — it — ” Strike stopped and drew a

deep breath. He rolled the carcass over on its side and began again. “See that heatray burn? Well, here’s what happened. When we found the paralysis apparatus on the blink, we were practically here already, so we figured we’d take this freak with our regular equipment. We found it crawling around with little jets of fire occasionally licking out of its mouth or snout or whatever it is. It was burning this mossy junk that grows all over, and also toasting plenty of these snail-like things, and then siphoning them up. Omnivorous.

“Well, the job looked like a cinch, so I creased it across the spine with a heatray, just enough to double it up while we doped out a muzzle to cap that fiery mouth. It twisted into a knot, all right, but then the damndest thing happened. The thing split down the middle like an over-ripe fruit and another Cacus popped out almost full-born. The new one spouted a terrific blast of fire at us, and while we ducked out of range, the new Cacus just sat down and made a meal off its mother’s — or is it its father’s-insides. You could see the creature grow by inches till it got about the size of the original. Then it made for the ship.

“Leeds and Machen were guarding the airlock, and they gave the second Cacus full-power heatray. It never bothered the thing. It just burned the two of ‘em to so much charcoal with a single breath and pushed on inside the ship.” Strike’s mouth twisted bitterly at the memory. “Most of the gang escaped, though a few are still in there, safe behind the emergency bulkheads and with some of the air still preserved. Don’t think anyone else was hurt.”

The trio hurried toward The Ark.

“So the Cacus is bisexuals” said Gerry wonderingly. “Self-fertilizing. That’s amazing. And only one of them on the whole satellite! That’s really amazing.”

Strike looked at her queerly.

“You don’t grasp the truly amazing part of it—the Cacus’ imperviousness to Leeds’ and Machen’s heat guns. Don’t you see, Gerry? When Cacus number one was attacked by the heatray, it promptly transferred all its life and intelligence to the youngster in its womb. But it also transferred the power of unbelievable adaptability, so when Cacus number two was born it was completely defended against that heatray forever henceforth.

“It’d be the same for any other weapon we have for capturing an animal alive; it would simply let itself be born again fully adapted and protected. The only way

we can stop this monstrosity is by suspending instantly all its vital functions, or by killing it outright.”

Gerry thought for a moment. “Well, why worry?” she said finally. “A cathode gun will always do the trick.”

“That’s just it,” said Strike with melancholy triumph. “The door to the arsenal was open when the Cacus entered the ship. Everyone ran out of there in a hurry, and there isn’t a cathode gun in the crowd.”

Gerry snorted.

“You certainly have a genius for getting into trouble. But it can’t be as bad as you say. For one thing, this business about instant adaptability is so much moon-truffle. It’s fantastic. Leeds’ and Machen’s guns simply failed. Or maybe they shot wildly.”

Strike expressed unutterable scorn. Gerry Carlyle’s crew were all sharpshooters, and they simply never got rattled.

“You’ll soon see for yourself,” was all he said.

When the three of them approached The Ark, the crew gave a ragged cheer for their famous leader and rallied hopefully around, visibly heartened. Nothing in their experience had ever completely baffled Gerry Carlyle, except the strange case of the Venusian murri, and they had confidence she would get them out of this predicament.

Gerry looked over the familiar faces with relief-Kranz, Barrows, Michaels-most of her veterans were all right.

“Let’s find out about this adaptability stuff first of all,” she decided. “Anyone got a hypo rifle handy?”

The original hunting party had carried several, and presently one of them cautiously approached the open port of The Ark to act as decoy while Gerry stood within easy range, rifle ready. The decoy peered gingerly inside the ship, passed the two grim chunks of seared flesh and fabric that marked the pyres of two brave men, then finally vanished inside. Minutes dragged by. Then a faint shout rang in the watchers’ helmets, and suddenly the man tore out of The Ark as

fast as he could run.

Once outside, he gave a tremendous upward leap many feet high, and just cleared a sizzling tongue of hot flame that belched out of the door behind him.

The Cacus, bulgy-eyed and hot-breathed, crouched angrily at the door.

Quickly Gerry drove home three hypodermic bullets in the creature's soft flesh in the crevices between the armor-like coverings. They took quick effect. The Cacus' head drooped sleepily, and it moved uncertainly as if undecided whether to come out or stay in.

Then suddenly a series of hideous abdominal convulsions wracked the thing.

The monster rolled over, still inside the ship; as if an invisible surgeon slit the Cacus open for two-thirds its length, the abdomen parted. Like some strange phoenix of terror, a new Cacus struggled out of the dying body of the old, stood defiantly with the upper half of its body raised on the six legs.

Unerringly and with no sign of nerves, Gerry deliberately emptied the hypodermic rifle into the new Cacus. The creature lowered itself to the metal floor, hunching along like a caterpillar. Then it turned and commenced ravenously to devour the soft inner parts of its host's anatomy.

Jerkily it seemed to increase in size, like a speeded-up motion picture of subaqueous life.

The hypo slugs had absolutely no effect upon it.

Petulantly Gerry slammed the rifle to the ground, where it bounced lightly.

"That's impossible!" she cried. "I've never heard of such a thing before in the entire Solar System!"

"Maybe it got here from some other solar system," Tommy said. "Lord knows how, and isn't native here. But that won't help subduing it."

"Rats! How about anesthetic gas? Any bombs available?"

A dozen were turned up. The Cacus having disappeared from view, Kranz

daringly ran up to The Ark, threw several of the bombs in, and shoved the port partly closed. In less than five minutes the port was nudged wide open again, and the Cacus, ugly and flame-wrapped, glared challengingly at the little group of scattered humans. Everyone saw instantly that the new Cacus was slightly smaller than the one before, and was still growing. The amazing re-birth had defeated the anesthetic gas as well.

“Well,” said Gerry cheerfully, “I guess we’ll just have to quit playing games.”

Chapter XIII. Duval the Magnificent

She quickly set up Lunde’s model paralysis ray machine. It worked successfully on Kranz, to everyone’s amusement, and Gerry advanced on The Ark. Instantly the Cacus, watchfully guarding the port, emitted a tremendous streamer of fire close to the ground, curling up at the end like an enormous prehensile tongue. Gerry marked the limit of that flame and stopped outside it. Aiming the paralysis ray at the Cacus, she flipped the activating switch.

Nothing happened. Gerry fiddled with the lens to no avail. She moved closer, only to be forced to scamper out of range of the breath of fire. Then she remembered. Lunde had told her this was a small-scale model, with less than half the power of the working model. The Cacus out-ranged them; they couldn’t get close enough to allow the smaller ray machine to take effect.

The Cacus blew another fiery lance at the crew, as if in derision, then turned at some vibration within the ship and moved into its depths. Abandoning its sluggish mode of crawling, the Cacus coiled and raised its tail over its back much in the manner of the scorpion, and trotted off on its six curious legs in search of some incautious engineer who was seeking, perhaps, to sneak out to safety.

Gerry wore a baffled expression.

“That,” she pronounced, “beats me. It looks like stalemate.”

“Pardon, mademoiselle. Not stalemate.” Everyone turned to look at Duval, who had been completely forgotten in the excitement.

“No?” said Strike. “Then it’s a pretty good imitation of stalemate. He can’t catch us in the open; we can’t do anything to him.”

“But, monsieur, every second that passes works in favor of the enemy. Our oxygen supply grows short. It is a situation of the most desperate. I, Duval, say it.”

Immediately, though no one had noticed the mustiness of their air before, every person there gestured toward his throat and fumbled quickly with the oxygen valves. Breathing became consciously shallow, slow. There was no sign of panic among these veterans, but uneasiness was a definite presence among them.

Gerry bit her lip. “Any suggestions, Duval? You’ve played aces every trick so far.”

“Merci bien. Yes, mademoiselle, I have the suggestion to offer. To combat our enemy, it is necessary that we study him, find his points vulnerable, if such he has.”

“And how’ll you get that monstrosity under your microscope?”

Duval’s teeth flashed. “Ah. To study the present Monsieur Cacus, that is not possible. But his ancestors-eh?”

Startled looks were exchanged.

“Say, that’s a thought!” Strike cried, and led a rapid trek across the plain to where the carcass of the first Cacus lay disemboweled. While not scientists in the strict sense, all the Carlyle crew had had scientific education and training. Almost at once a remarkable discovery was made by Kranz.

“Captain, will you take a look at this?” He was holding up the dead creature’s funnel-shaped mouth, spreading it wide apart with his hands. Instead of true teeth, the entire inner mouth was composed of a sort of flexible horny growth which probably served for mastication when and if necessary. But the extraordinary thing was that every available crevice was veined with a gray, spongy mass.

“That,” said Kranz, “is spongy platinum!”

“And say!” someone chimed in impressively. “The whole Satellite must be rank with platinum if there’s enough to impregnate the system of any animal life.”

Excitement over a possible bonanza discovery stirred them momentarily. Then Duval's ringing voice held them all again.

"Ah! But more important, I believe, it is that we have here the explanation of the breath of fire! One may read in any textbook of chemistry elementary that when hydrogen or coal gas is made to pass over spongy platinum, it makes of fire, is it no? Well! One may also read that anerobic bacteria, acting upon matter of decomposition in swamps, generate methane, which is one of the constituents-as is hydrogen-of coal gas. Now! All the world knows we have in our digestive tracts many bacteria. Surely, Monsieur Cacus, within, contains anerobic bacteria which act on the decaying matter animal and vegetable, of which a decomposition product must be gas similar to coal gas. Thus the breath of fire!" Duval finished with a flourish.

Everyone agreed: the Frenchman had something there. But how to turn it to advantage? Strike screwed his face up thoughtfully.

"Spongy platinum, then," he groped hesitantly, "is a catalyst —"

Instantly Gerry took him up.

"Of course! A catalyst! And there are several things which, in combination with it, kill its action as a catalytic agent. The halogens, for instance-bromine, flourine. Or hydrogen cyanide —"

Everyone looked at everyone else, eager to advance Gerry's idea, uncertain just how to go about it.

"That's smart brain-work, Gerry," said Strike, "but our supplies might as well be on Sirius for all the good they can do us. Where'll we get any of the things you mentioned?"

"If it pleases you, mademoiselle —" It was Duval again, and hopes soared at the confidence in his voice. "I, Duval, can perhaps solve this problem. You see these blossoms, so tiny, so unimportant?" He toed one of the little groups of close-clinging growths with the colorless, star-shaped blooms. "They are found, I believe, in one species or another, on all the satellites of Jupiter. We know them well. They are related, one might say, to the night-shade of Earth, because they have poison within them. It is, as you have said it, hydrogen cyanide."

Without the necessity of a single command, the crew went to work. Three of them got furiously busy picking great handfuls of the plants which offered them salvation. Another ran back to the prow of The Ark, from which the man in the pilot house had dropped the important instruments, and had him toss out a spacesuit helmet; it would make a perfect pot for boiling.

The little remaining drinking water left in the pilot house was also lowered. A pair of low-power heat beams was arranged under a tripod made of three of the useless hypo rifles. In a very few minutes the mixture was bubbling merrily-it came to a boil quickly in the absence of much pressure-brewing a vengeful hell-broth for the Cacus.

By the time it cooled to a scummy liquid with a brown substance deposited from the solution, the whole party was laboring for breath, with the exception of Gerry and Duval, who hadn't been in their spacesuits as long as the others.

Gerry peered around the row of blue-lipped faces; what she had to do now was hard. Someone had to be chosen to try conclusions with the Cacus; someone had to risk his life, perhaps lose it, in a desperate effort to introduce the HCN into the monster's mouth.

True, it had to be done at close range; so why not try the paralysis ray? But Gerry had come to distrust the ray machine, which was the cause of all the trouble. Perhaps it didn't have the proper power even at close range. If a life had to be lost, it would simply be thrown away if the paralysis ray failed to work. But it might do some good if lost while putting into effect Duval's textbook chemistry.

The crew would never under any circumstances allow Gerry to try it, so she was forced to call for volunteers. To the last member, they all stepped forward.

But Tommy Strike stepped farthest, taking the bowl of deadly juice from Gerry's hands.

"My job," he said briefly. "I'm sort of responsible for this mess. It's up to me to straighten things out."

Gerry's eyes misted. She had no right to refuse him. Someone had to go and Strike, as co-captain, had authority to choose himself. And rigid discipline of the Carlyle expeditions insisted on no needless sacrifice of life or limb. Strike would

go alone. Gerry needed all her iron control at that moment.

Strike opened one of the meta-glass gas bombs to allow the gas to disperse, then filled it with most of the poison solution, saving a little for a second try in case he failed. With a crooked grin he waved salute and started toward The Ark. Deftly, and before anyone had the slightest inkling of what was happening, Duval slipped up behind Strike, tripped him, and threw him easily to the ground. He caught the meta-glass ball as it floated downward.

Gerry yelled at him.

“Duval! Stop it! You’ve done enough already, besides, you’re not properly one of us at all. Put that down!”

Duval’s smile gleamed brightly. “But I have just made a flight impossible from Ganymede to Satellite Five in a scrap heap. Today is my day of luck! I cannot fail!”

“Duval! Come back! We want no quixotic foolishness. If you understood our discipline you’d realize we just don’t do things that way.”

And Duval of the empty life, whose passing none would mourn, who burned to do heroic things in the grand manner, said soberly:

“And if you, mademoiselle, but understood the French, you would realize that we Gascons do things this way.”

And he was gone, running rapidly toward The Ark. Strike floundered finally to his feet, snarling. He seized the paralysis ray model and set out after Duval as fast as he could go. In a flash the entire crew made a concerted rush in the same direction. Only Gerry’s savage commands halted them reluctantly.

Duval reached the port, peered cautiously in, then vanished inside. Strike followed him less than a half minute later. Then nothing. The watchers outside listened intently at their helmet earphones, but no word came from either Duval or Strike. They got in touch with those still trapped in the ship, but the latter reported nothing. That was natural, as the lethal game being played between Duval, Strike, and the Cacus was taking place along nearly airless passages where sound would not carry well.

Presently the listeners were shocked to hear a high-pitched squeal like that of a wounded horse coming faintly through the earphones. It was nothing human: it must have been picked up by someone's helmet mike at a point very close to the screamer. At that, all restraint was flung aside and the crew, with Gerry in the lead, pounded pell-mell over the solid terrain and recklessly into The Ark.

They burst in gasping on a climax of terrible ferocity. It was so swift, so savagely sudden, that it was all over before they could throw their feeble powers into the balance.

The Cacus had evidently been prowling down a side passage, and Duval had attracted its attention, then ducked around a corner into the main corridor; when they met, it would be at close quarters where there was no chance for the Frenchman to miss. As the crew tumbled in, Duval was crouching by the passage corner and had just finished yammering at Tommy Strike to stay back and not be a fool. Strike had apparently started in the wrong direction and had just located the real theater of action; he was running purposely along the corridor to back up Duval's play.

And then everything happened at once, like a badly-rehearsed bit of stage continuity in which the actors rush through their parts almost simultaneously.

The Cacus, tail curled up and running on its six legs, skidded furiously into the main corridor of The Ark. At once it spied Duval and emitted another of those hideous shrilling sounds. Duval's arm went back, whipped forward. A glittering arc made a line straight for the ugly, horn-like snout of the beast. Strike, off to one side and several feet behind Duval, dropped to his knees and fumbled with the ray-box. A terrific blast of flame belched out from the Cacus to envelop head and shoulders of the doughty Frenchman.

For a moment it appeared that the fiery stream had caught the container of HCN and demolished it. But no-the Frenchman had been the quicker; he had scored a bull's-eye. By the time the Cacus turned to annihilate Strike, the hydrogen cyanide had entered into combination with the spongy platinum, and nothing but a burst of gas came forth. From that moment the monster was through. Strike brought the miniature paralysis ray to bear, and instantly the Cacus collapsed in a twitching mound of nauseous flesh.

Cathode guns were brought from the arsenal, and the Cacus was ruthlessly

blasted out of existence. Then Gerry and Strike hurried to Duval's side. The Frenchman was terribly burned, his face blackened, blinded travesty of a man. The spark of life was almost extinguished. But as the two knelt beside him, Duval's cracked lips managed a feeble grin.

"Mademoiselle," he whispered, "will have to collect that wager I have won from the good Bullwer. We made the flight. He has lost a week's pay, that one." Something like a laugh bubbled up from his seared chest.

Gerry groaned in anguish.

"Duval! Oh, you magnificent fool, Duval! Why did you do it? Because of me, you must die. That's wrong —"

"Death?" Duval somehow managed a shrug. "Death, yes. But what a death of the most heroic!" And with supreme courtesy to the last, Duval carefully rolled over to face the wall, that a woman might not have to suffer the unpleasant sight of a dying man.

Somberly, Strike helped Gerry to her feet, and she clung to him tightly. For a while they said no word. All about them throughout the ship came the noises of normal life being resumed. The entrance port clanged shut. Voices rang out. Distantly a generator began to hum. Bulkheads rumbled open again. Oxygen hissed into the airless passages. Feet drummed faintly.

Then Gerry Carlyle gave Louis Duval his epitaph.

"There lies," she said, "a very gallant gentleman."

ENERGY EATERS

Chapter XIII. Storm Over Gerry

NOBODY knows exactly what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable body. Science, with a view to solving that bewhiskered problem, had been eagerly watching the feud between Nine Planets Films, Inc. and Gerry Carlyle, the Catch-‘emAlive woman. But so far honors had been about even, though Gerry’s hot temper had become even fierier under the strain, and Von Zorn, president of the great motion picture company, had been under a doctor’s care for some time.

At the moment he was sitting behind his gleaming glass desk and twitching slightly as he glared at Anthony Quade, ace director and trouble-shooter extraordinary for Nine Planets.

“Look,” he said in a deceptively soft voice, “I don’t ask for much, Mr. Quade. Just a little cooperation from my staff. All I want is a signature, two short words on this contract. That’s not too much to expect from a billion dollar organization with the cream of the System’s technical and promotional brains, is it?”

Quade settled his large, big-boned body more comfortably in the chrome and leather chair and blinked sleepily. Von Zorn changed his tone and his voice quavered slightly as he went on.

“I’m a sick man, Tony. I can’t stand this continual worry. Somehow I don’t think I have long to live. My heart. And all I ask you to do is get a signature on this contract.”

“A great act, Chief,” Quade said approvingly. “But I’ve heard it a few dozen times before. I think I’m allergic to your heart. Every time you get angry I find myself dodging Whip’s on Venus or shooting energy-storms on Mars. I need a vacation.”

“Afraid?” Von Zorn asked tauntingly.

“Sure,” Quade said. “I’ve fought haywire robots from Pluto; I’ve handled the worst temperaments on the Moon; I’ve even brought you pix of the Martian

Inferno. But I positively won't risk my life with that — that Roman candle in skirts."

"Think of the box office."

"I know. It's worth millions to have Gerry Carlyle tied up in a contract so she won't go off and bring back a cargo of Martian monsters for the London Zoo every time we shoot a Mars epic with robots. I don't like it any better than you do, Chief. That dame scoops us every time — and the public won't look at our robots when they can see the real thing. I can see myself asking Gerry Carlyle to sign that contract."

Von Zorn hesitated. "Tony, I'd ask her myself. Only —"

"Only what?"

"She won't sign."

Quade nodded, frowning. "We've got nothing she wants. You can offer her a fortune and she'd still say no. The only — wait a minute!"

Von Zorn tensed. "Got an idea?"

"Maybe. Gerry Carlyle will sell her soul for one thing — a new monster. Something nobody's ever captured or even seen before. Jumping Jupiter, I've got it! If she'll make a flicker for us, we'll give her the beast for her Zoo." Von Zorn said, "And just where do we get this beast?"

"Just leave that to me. I've plenty of technical resources in the labs."

"If you're thinking of a synthetic monster —"

"What I'm thinking of will surprise you," Quade said mysteriously. "Give me thirty days, and I'll get you a beast that'll make Gerry Carlyle turn green. Chief, she'll be begging you to let her sign that contract."

Grinning, Quade went out, leaving Von Zorn licking his lips at the prospect of a defeated and supplicant Gerry Carlyle.

It was bedlam. Newscasters swarmed in the office; photographers snapped their flashbulbs continually; questions and shouts filled the place with babble. Through it all the central figure posed gracefully against the massive desk, cool and unperturbed as an iceberg.

She was dressed in mirror-polished high boots, riding pants, and polo shirt open at her tanned throat; these were the badges of her profession. For this was the New York office of Gerry Carlyle, grim huntress of fierce monsters on the inhospitable planets of the solar System, serene and gracious hostess now.

But the occasion was one that tried to the utmost the steel control she placed on her fiery temper. For Gerry, according to the delighted newsmen, had been scooped — and how!

“No two ways about it, Miss Carlyle,” said one of the reporters. “This what’s-his-name has really got something — a form of life nobody’s ever seen before.”

“Seeing is believing,” said Gerry sweetly.

“Every newscast from the Moon, for the last six hours has had something about these jiggers. From Mercury, the guy says.”

Gerry quirked up an eyebrow. “I’ve scoured Mercury’s twilight zone twice for lifeforms; I’ve brought back the only living things ever seen by man on the surface of Mercury. I even went over the dark side once.”

“These animals come from Hotside.”

“That, to begin with, is a bare-faced lie,” Gerry smiled. “D’you know what the temperature is on the sunward side of Mercury? No matter what kind of insulation he used in his spacesuit, a man’s brains would boil in a split second.”

“Sure,” said the reporter. “But this guy has the creatures, Miss Carlyle, and nobody has ever seen anything like ‘em before, and he claims they’re from Hotside.”

“Well, you’re just wasting your time, boys, if you’ve come up, here to get my statement. I’ve already told you it’s a hoax.”

“Professor Boleur looked ‘em over. He says they’re the McCoy,” persisted the

nervy reporter, defying the lightning.

Gerry scowled at this, and more flashbulbs went off. Boleur's reputation was unimpeachable, impossible to ignore.

Just then Gerry's secretary came in, looking apprehensive.

"A telecall, Miss Carlyle. From-er-from the Moon."

Electric tension filled the room. Gerry took a deep breath, opened her mouth, and closed it again. She said very softly, "If it's from Mr. Von Zorn, tell him I'm not in."

"No, it's a Mr. Anthony Quade."

"I've never heard of him," Gerry said witheringly, and turned away. But a dozen eager voices informed her that Tony Quade was the man who had brought back the monsters from Mercury, and that he was one of the biggest figures in the film industry.

"Really!" said Gerry scornfully, and strode into the televisor room, dark eyes narrowed dangerously. The reporters trailed her.

Quade was visible on the screen, leaning negligently forward, puffing on a blackened briar. He opened his mouth to speak, but the woman gave him no chance.

"You," she stated, "are Quade, Von Zorn's stooge. For months your unpleasant boss has been after me to make a picture for Nine Planets. Whatever this nonsense is about bringing back a monster from Hotside, its purpose is to trick me into signing a contract. The answer is — no! But definitely!" The cold, incisive words made Quade blink. Obviously he had underestimated this very capable young woman.

He shrugged.

"You're quite right, Miss Carlyle. Except that there's no trickery involved. It's a straight business proposition. As a rule I don't like to do business with women because they're apt to use their emotions instead of their brains, but — " Quade paused, eyeing Gerry blandly.

The woman's lips tightened. For her, Catch-'emAlive Carlyle, to be accused of feminine weaknesses, was insupportable.

"Go ahead, Mr. Quade," she said. "I'm listening."

Quade nodded slightly, and Von Zorn himself moved into focus. His small, simian face was twisted into a somewhat frightful smile. Between cupped hands he held what appeared, at first glance, to be a large ball of fur, perhaps a trifle larger than a porcupine. It was amorphous, settling itself constantly into new positions like a jellyfish.

Von Zorn lifted one hand and literally poured the remarkable creature from one palm to the other. As he did so, a myriad pale orange and blue sparks flickered about the tips of the animal's furlike coat.

Gerry's lips parted to form a round, red "O." For a moment she stood undecided, her extreme distaste for Von Zorn battling with her natural instincts as a huntress.

Curiosity won. She moved closer to the screen.

"It's something new," she admitted reluctantly. "I've never run across anything just like it. Where did you get it, Mr. Quade?"

"Mercury Hotside. That's the truth."

"Well — how?"

Von Zorn broke in, leering slightly.

"That's a professional secret."

Gerry looked through the man without apparent difficulty.

"What sort of creature is it, Mr. Quade? It hasn't any eyes, nose, ears or limbs, as far as I can see."

"Quite right," Quade said, "It has no visible sensory organs. Our labs are working on that angle right now, investigating. If you'd like to examine one of these closely — we have several of 'em — they'll be in the Nine Planets exhibit

room on Lunar Boulevard. I'd like to send you one for the London Zoo, but —”

Von Zorn broke in.

“I can send one to you by spacemail right now, if — ” He held up a sheet of paper that was obviously a contract. “If you get what I mean!” Gerry’s rigid control snapped. She struck savagely at the televisor switch, and the screen went blank. The reporters surged around her. This was a story! Gerry Carlyle beaten fairly, forced to dicker with her most hated enemy if she wished to keep the reputation of the London Zoo as the only complete collection of the System’s life.

Gerry impaled everyone in the room with a scorching glance. “I know what you’re thinking,” she snapped. “And the answer is no. Finally and irrevocably — no!”

The reporters left with the air of men retreating from the brink of a volcano, and presently Gerry Carlyle was alone.

The volcano paced the room, seething. After a time Gerry paused, and let out a quiet whistle. She called her secretary

“Yes, Miss Carlyle?”

“Give the London Zoo a call, will you? Tell ‘em to send over Volume 7 from my private file. By stratosphere plane. I’m in a hurry.” Gerry’s notebooks, compiled into a library of incredible fact that read like fantasy, were the result of years spent exploring the alien worlds of the System.

She remembered now that, during one of her earliest trips, she had discovered a microscopic Martian spore that in some respects resembled Von Zorn’s Mercurian importation. Unfortunately she couldn’t recall much about it, but nevertheless a vague uneasiness gnawed at the back of her mind.

She had a hunch that Von Zorn and Quade were running into trouble.

Chapter XIV. The Prometheans

Dr. Phineas McColm was a small, wiry man who was appalled by his unconventional mind. Science, to him, was an ever-new and ever-delightful

adventure. Often his startling theories had brought down on him thunderbolts of his colleagues, but somehow McColm always had a way of proving his wild guesses — which, actually, weren't guesses at all. A less capable man could never have become chief of staff for the Nine Planets Films labs.

As though to make up for his mental Bohemianism, McColm always wore the most correct garments in a neat and dignified manner, and inevitably a pince-nez dangled by a black ribbon from his lapels. He had never been known to look through them, however, since, despite his years of experiment in eye-straining laboratory work and the fantasy magazines he read for relaxation, he had the eyesight of a hawk.

Right now he was sitting in Von Zorn's office, reading a copy of Thrilling Wonder Stories . He stuck the magazine in his pocket and stood up as the door opened and Von Zorn and Quade came in. Quade held one of the Mercurian creatures in his cupped hands.

“Hello, there,” he said to McColm. “Found out anything?”

“A little,” the scientist admitted. “There's something I want to know, though. How'd you manage to get those things from Hotside.”

“Robots and remote control,” Quade said. “Keep this under your hat, though. I took a specially-insulated space ship to Mercury and sent out some robots, using a very narrow control beam — and even then I got plenty of interference from the sun.”

“By the looks of your expense sheet,” Von Zorn growled, “you must have had plenty of interference all round.”

“It took power, Chief. I was fighting the sun's energy, and even at a distance of thirty-six million miles that's no joke. Lucky we've got the best robots in the System and the perfected beam control.”

“That's true,” McColm said. “These — what you call 'em?”

“Prometheans,” Quade supplied. “After Prometheus, who lit his torch from the sun.”

“Good name. That's exactly what these creatures do, you know. They get energy

directly from the sun. Those spines” — McColm took the Promethean from Quade’s hands and scrutinized it closely — “they look like heavy fur, but they’re largely of mineral content. They serve a dual purpose. Tiny muscles activate them so they can function as legs, and when the Prometheans move, which isn’t very often, they can scurry along like caterpillars. But these spines also develop electric energy on which the creature lives.

“One of the metals we’ve isolated in the spines is selenium. Now it’s obvious that under the conditions of terrific heat and light on Hotside, the selenium reacts with some other metal — it might be one of several — to generate a weak electric current. We can do that in the lab, of course. The Prometheans store the electricity, like condensers, using what little they need whenever necessary.” McColm’s chubby face was alight with interest.

Von Zorn said hesitantly, “You mean — they eat electricity?”

“Don’t we all?” Quade asked, and the scientist nodded.

“Of course. You eat solar energy, or you couldn’t live. You’ll find chloroplasts — tiny gobular bodies — in the green leaves of vegetation. They contain chlorophyll. And they store sunlight as chemical energy. Photosynthesis enables a plant to change simple inorganic compounds into the complex molecules which form a great part of our own food. Here’s the cycle: the plant uses chlorophyll to transform carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates, which give us solar energy in usable form when we eat the green leaf.

“These Prometheans simply take a short cut — which they can do because matter is basically electric. Millikan proved that with his oil-drop experiment. The atomic structure of a Promethean enables it to absorb energy direct without any intermediate stages.”

Von Zorn, who had been listening with eyes closed, gave a slight start and opened them.

“How about keeping ‘em alive? We’re a long way from Mercury.”

McColm tut-tutted.

“We’ve solved that one,” he answered. “We used a dry cell. The Promethean wrapped itself around the terminals and sucked the juice out of the battery in no

time at all. And for a while it was quite active, too. It had more energy than it gets in many a long day on Mercury. Figuratively speaking, of course, for it's always day on Hotside. I compute that a Promethean needs one dry cell a week to keep it healthy."

The annunciator buzzed. Simultaneously Ailyn Van entered.

An unusual woman, Ailyn. She was the ultra-modern star of Nine Planets, and her fan mail had strained the struts of many a spaceship. Despite the streamlined boniness of her face, she was, as the saying goes, a knockout. Her platinum-tattooed eyes passed over McColm, annihilated Quade, and raised Von Zorn's temperature.

"I want a Promethean," she said, and that was that.

Von Zorn gulped.

"Uh — I don't know, Ailyn. We only have nine of them, and the lab boys need them for experiments. What do you want one for, anyway?"

"They're so cunning," Ailyn explained. "And I'm having some publicity stills taken tomorrow. It'll be lovely publicity."

Spying the Promethean McColm still held, she strode over and calmly appropriated the Mercurian, which made no comment save for a faintly fluorescent sparkle.

"Well," said Ailyn, pouring the creature from one hand to another and watching the fireworks. "It tingles."

"Mild electric shock," McColm explained. "Whenever it's moved about, it has to adjust itself. This means expenditure of energy; hence the sparkling. It lives on electric energy. You feed it a dry cell once a week —"

"How quaint." Ailyn stabbed the unfortunate scientist with a platinum glance, and went out trailing orange and blue sparks. And quite suddenly Quade felt an icy qualm of uneasiness.

He turned to the others.

“I wonder if we were wise in letting that creature out of our hands before we know everything there is to know about it,” he said slowly.

McColm shrugged.

“They can’t be dangerous. They aren’t large enough to hold a strong electric charge.”

The annunciator buzzed again. A voice said, “Mr. Von Zorn — Miss Kathleen Gregg to see you. She wants a — one of the Mercurians.”

And that was the beginning. The Prometheans were the latest rage of the stars — the newest fad of Hollywood on the Moon. There were nine of the electric creatures to pass around among a hundred stars and featured players, not to mention the wives of the board of directors. Von Zorn helplessly permitted the Prometheans to be taken from him, with the one proviso, of course, that they remain on the Moon so Gerry Carlyle might not have a chance to acquire one of them. The price of a Promethean skyrocketed overnight into the thousands, with no sellers.

And less than twenty-four hours later — the Moon started to go haywire. Quade and McColm were leaving the offices of Nine Planets with the intention of absorbing solar energy as prepared by the Silver Spacesuit’s renowned chef. They got into Quade’s surface-car but the automatic starter did not immediately operate. Quade investigated.

“Battery must be dead,” he grunted. Getting out, he lifted the hood and let out a soft whistle of amazement. Wrapped about the battery terminals like a drowsy cat was one of the Prometheans.

“Just look at that,” Quade said to McColm over his shoulder. “The little devil’s deliberately sucked all the juice out of the battery. Wonder who put him there? A corny gag, if you ask me.” He slipped on a glove and ungently removed the Promethean, tossing the creature to the street, where it lay sparkling vigorously and continuously. But, more surprising, it was much increased in size over any of the other Mercurians.

“It was hungry,” McColm said, “that’s all. Or shall we say thirsty? Our little friend here has been tapping a sort of fountain of youth. More electricity at one time than he ever got on Mercury. Naturally the size increased. Doubtless its

activity will increase proportionately.”

Taking the cue, the Promethean arose, sparkling indignantly, and moved off down the street with precise movements of its under-spines. The dignity of its progress was somewhat impaired by a pronounced libration.

The Promethean wobbled.

Quade and McColm exchanged looks suddenly grinned. Though the creature bore no resemblance to anything human, it somehow managed to convey a perfect impression of an intoxicated reveler veering homeward with alcoholic dignity.

“He can’t take it,” Quade chuckled. “He’s tight.”

“Too much energy,” McColm nodded. “He’s drunk with energy, more electricity than he’s ever had before at one time.”

Quade recaptured the Promethean and left the scientist briefly to take his prisoner into the Nine Planets building and turn him over to the labs. When he returned he found McColm waiting with a taxi. They drove to the Silver Spacesuit and found a table near the stages, where hundreds of important acts were striving valiantly to catch the eye of movie mogul and talent scout.

Right now a trio of acrobatic dancers were performing. The woman had form-fitting gravity plates, powered by wires invisible in the tricky lighting, and weighed less than a pound, so that her companions could perform seemingly incredible feats of skill and strength. But this was an old stunt, and attracted little attention.

Without warning the lights flickered and dimmed. Simultaneously the woman, who was at the moment shooting rapidly through the air, fell heavily upon an assistant director who was absorbedly eating lobster at a ringside table. There was an immediate confusion of acrobat, assistant director, and lobster. The audience laughed with genial approval.

Then the mirth changed to indignation as the lights went out altogether. There was mild excitement as the early evening crowd milled around aimlessly in the dark.

Wordlessly Quade and McColm ploughed through the mob toward the rear. There, where the power leadins passed through the meter box, another of the Prometheans was found coiled around the bared wires. The headwaiter, gripping a flashlight, was staring in wide-eyed amazement at the object and shaking his free hand.

“It — it shocked me,” he murmured. “Ouch.”

Quade found a glove in his pocket, and with its aid he ripped the rapidly growing Promethean from the wires. The lights flared up again. With the Mercurian under one arm he fled back through the cocktail bar in a short cut to Lunar Boulevard, McColm at his heels.

“If any more of these little devils are loose, they may get into the central power house. That’d be plain hell.”

And, just then, every light on Hollywood on the Moon except those on vehicles wavered and went out.

“You’re a little late, Tony,” McColm said. “They’re taking the juice from the generator terminals right now.”

Chapter XV. Panic on the Moon

Quade hailed a taxi, leaped for its running-board. He promptly found himself sailing up in an astounding jump, hurtling completely over the surface-car and coming down lightly on the other side.

The cabbie thrust her head unwarily through the window to stare at this athletic marvel, and dived ungracefully out to crack her head smartly against the paving of Lunar Boulevard.

McColm, guessing what had happened, hastily glided around the taxi and helped the two men to their feet.

“The gravity plates below us,” he said tonelessly. “They’re not working either. More Prometheans sucking away the power.”

“You don’t tell me,” said Quade bitterly, experimenting with a tender ankle. “Take us to Central Power, buddy, and make it fast.” As the taxi jerked into

motion he murmured, "Thank God there's only nine of these blasted things altogether." He still held the captive Promethean and now, opening a baggage compartment, he thrust the creature inside and slammed the panel.

Men and women were pouring from night spots and buildings along Lunar Boulevard. Even late workers on the sets of Nine Planets gave up and joined the tumultuous throng. Surface autocars, with their individual batteries and lights, were small oases in the absolute blackness of interstellar space. Hollywood on the Moon was half frightened and half amused by what they considered something of a gag while a temporary difficulty in the power rooms was repaired.

Through the mob Quade's taxi scooted skillfully, heading for the entrance to the lunar caverns, where gigantic generators produced the electric power that was the very life-blood of the Moon. Arriving at the skyscraper that masked the mighty machines beneath, Quade and McColm piled out.

"Turn around so your headlights shine down the entrance ramp," Quade commanded, thrusting a bill in the driver's hand. Without waiting for an answer he followed McColm down into gloom.

The elevator bank was motionless and dark, but not silent. From within two of the shafts floated up a terrific shouting from carloads of passengers trapped between floors and suspended precariously by emergency brakes.

Quade ran to the stairs and led the way down the descending spiral. Two minutes of clattering, reckless flight in total darkness brought the men to the power room level. A flickering red glow guided them to the central cavern, a vast natural chasm filled with the dynamos, generators, and huge machines that kept the Moon alive. Several piles of cotton waste were burning here and there.

Normally everything in the power house is more or less automatic, and few attendants are necessary. At the moment one of these, a burly man with a harassed expression, was striving frantically to pry loose one of the Prometheans from the terminals of a generator.

Since the Mercurian was more than ten feet in diameter and spread over most of the generator's surface, the burly man's efforts were not notably successful. Indeed, his attempt to pry the creature loose with a crowbar seemed merely a gesture.

Quade ran forward. The whole cavern seemed to explode in a blinding blaze of flame. There was a deafening thunderclap, and an invisible hand seemed to lift Quade and McColm and smash them back. The attendant vanished. A spouting, roaring fountain of sparkling pinwheels showered over the power room's plastic floor.

Presently the world stopped reeling and Quade clambered unsteadily to his feet. The electric lights were again burning — blue mercury and pinkish helium globes glowed here and there among the others. With numbed surprise Quade noticed that the Promethean no longer clung to the naked power lines. But all over the room were scattered dozens of small Prometheans, glittering madly as they poured in a drunken rout toward the generators. A score of them reached the bared terminals, and the lights went out again.”

The cotton waste still burned. McColm arose, his round face grimy.

“Did you see that?” he breathed. “They’ve reproduced. When they get so much electricity stored up in them they can afford to share it with offspring, they divide by multiple fission.”

Quade was kneeling beside the attendant’s motionless body.

“Yeah ... he’s still alive. That’s a miracle. McColm.” He stood up, lips tightening grimly. “This is pretty serious. We’ve got to stop those things right away.”

The two men marched into the sparkling sea, kicking a path toward the generators. Quade, with his gloved hand, began pulling the Prometheans from the terminals, McColm tried to help, but was promptly knocked sprawling by a savage electric shock from one of the visibly growing Prometheans.

“Never mind,” Quade said swiftly. “I can pull ‘em off faster than they can climb back on. Find a bag or something to put them in.”

But it was too late, The Prometheans were, so to speak, in their cups, and large enough and active enough to cause Quade trouble. In some obscure fashion they realized that Quade was an enemy, trying to prevent them from reaching the intoxicating electric current. So they advanced with drunken persistence and surrounded him.

An electric shock is not calculated to induce calm. Quade yelled and fell down, his legs momentarily paralyzed. The Prometheans sparkled with a vaguely triumphant air and advanced.

McColm rushed in, kicking vigorously, and dragged Quade to safety.

“This’ll never do,” the scientist gasped. “There’s no bag to hold them in, and they’d burn their way out anyhow. We’ve got to get weapons.”

Quade stood up, tottering slightly.

“Where? The only weapons are in the prop department on the lot. This is a city, not a fortress. The police have gas guns and bullets, but the Prometheans don’t breathe and are too homogeneous to be harmed by explosives. They haven’t any vital parts. They’d just be blown apart and we’d have a lot of new Prometheans to fight.”

“Heat rays?” McColm said. “No, they’d absorb the energy. Wait! We might short-circuit them. They must have a positive and negative end, or they’d never be able to absorb the electricity as they do. If we could place an iron bar so as to touch each end —”

“Walking over a metal plate would act the same way,” Quade said, and pointed. One of the Prometheans was crawling idly over the iron housing of a turbine, completely unconcerned.

McColm blinked.

“Well — we might douse them with water and short them that way.”

Quade went to a drinking fountain and bent over it. Usually this broke a light-beam impinging on a photoelectric cell, and sent water spouting up. Nothing happened. The lights were out, of course.

Quade found a manually-operated fountain, but this, too, was useless.

“The pumps aren’t working,” he grunted. “They take power too, you know.”

When architects had designed the fantastic beauty and utility of Hollywood on the Moon, they had decided against placing any unsightly water tanks above

ground for gravity flow water. Instead, they had placed the storage tanks in the Moon's caverns, with powerful pumps to direct an upward flow.

"Well," McColm said desperately, "let's try clubs. Maybe we can beat them to a pulp." With this ferocious intention he found a crowbar for himself and one for Quade, and turned back to the Prometheans. These creatures, no longer molested, had returned to sucking juice from generators, and were having an uproarious time in their strange manner, dropping occasionally to the floor to reel about with dizzy delight, sparkling in all colors of the spectrum.

One of them wobbled toward Quade and made a playful dash at his ankles. The crowbar crashed down. But the Promethean seemed to ooze out from under the blow, squirting away to carom against one of its colleagues some distance away. The two Mercurians conferred for a moment, and then staggered off to a generator, sparkling mockingly at the discomfited Quade.

It was impossible to kill the creatures thus. And before long another terrific explosion rocked the power room and a second Promethean burst flaming into a score of smaller ones. Quade seized McColm's arm and drew him back to the comparative safety of the stairs.

"We're wasting our time," he panted. "Look at those devils crawling toward us to give us the works. We'll have to have help, that's all there is to it." He paused to lift the unconscious attendant to his shoulder and followed McColm up the stairs. A few Prometheans followed, but in their condition the puzzle of climbing steps was difficult if not insurmountable, and presently they all rolled down again.

The taxi-driver was still waiting, listening to the radio in her car.

"Nine Planet's office, quick," snapped Quade.

"You won't find nobody there," said the driver. "Von Zorn's ordered everybody to evacuate the Moon until the Mercurian menace is under control."

"Mercurian menace," Quade groaned. "That baboon would be melodramatic on his death-bed. All right — to the space port, then." As the taxi started he called, "How long were we down below?"

"Pretty long. Seemed like a century. A half hour, I guess. Von Zorn's speech

kicked open the emergency circuit, so everybody on the Moon must have listened in.”

“Radio?” McColm rasped. “Where’d they get the power?”

“Emergency batteries, of course,” Quade said.

They sped through a stricken city.

The panic was on. All Hollywood on the moon was fleeing for the space ships and safety. Occasionally a wild-eyed man sprang into the taxi’s path to flag a ride, but the expert driver tooled her car around without losing speed. Three times they heard distant explosions and saw momentary flares of sparks against the backdrop of starry darkness. Prometheans were multiplying

“It wouldn’t be so bad if they hadn’t all managed to get loose at the same time,” Quade muttered. “It was so damned quick. They had control before we knew there was any danger.”

With decreased gravity pedestrians bounced about like rubber balls. Luckily the street was level, but whenever the car hit a bump it rose for some distance, with the motor roaring and the wheels spinning madly. The space port was a shrieking bedlam of milling humanity in the fitful light of automobile lamps and improvised flares. Quade smiled grimly as he watched some of Nine Planets’ ruggedest he-men battling past frenzied women to get passage on the ships.

Occasionally Prometheans scurried about, kicked at and abused almost pathetic in their apparent lonely helplessness. But the stars, who had not long past displayed them proudly at social events, now screamed and ran at the very sight of a Mercurian.

Presently the outgoing ship was jammed full of humanity, and the airlock closed. Attendants shoved the crowd back to safety and signaled the okay to take off.

Nothing happened. Minutes passed. A chill wave of apprehension passed over the crowd. Then the lock swung ponderously open and the ship’s commander stood in the opening. He held in both hands a swollen, sparkling Promethean.

“All the juice is gone from the storage batteries,” he called. “Can’t generate a spark in the rocket chambers. And it’ll take hours to build up enough current to

energize the gravity plates.”

The same condition was found to exist on four other space ships. That left only a few, not nearly enough to evacuate a quarter of the Moon’s inhabitants. But these took off and sped toward Earth, sending frantic radio signals for aid. The Moon’s emergency radio equipment had gone dead when a Promethean found it, and signals broadcast from New York and London to the relay ships beyond the Heaviside layer brought little hope. All spacecraft within a wide radius had been ordered to converge on the Moon at top speed. But the distances were those of interplanetary space, and it would take time for the nearest vessel to arrive.

And time was important, terribly so.

Without power the air rectifiers were failing, the gigantic heating plates and coils died, and the beams holding down the artificial atmosphere were useless. In three or four hours the Moon would be literally a dead world.

The air was cold, rapidly getting colder. A knifing wind blew coldly from the Great Rim — a wind on the Moon, where none had blown for illimitable eons. Already the trapped atmosphere was moving out from the gigantic crater that held Hollywood on the Moon. With neither gravity nor force beams to hold it, the air was seeping over the Rim, diffusing to all parts of the surface, and dissipating in the vacuum of space.

Panic came swiftly to those caught in the death-trap. The most glamorous and beautiful city in the System now. And in four hours, it would be — a morgue!

Chapter XVI. The Ark Arrives

Gerry Carlyle paced the control room of the Ark and watched her chief pilot, Michaels, as he sat with lined, strong face intent on the instruments. The woman’s stubborn chin was set, her silken blond hair tousled.

“Pep it up, Michaels, can’t you?” she burst out. “It’s been an hour or more since the last signal came in from the Moon.”

“The refugee ships are still sending messages.” he grunted.

“What of? For all we know the Moon may be dead right now. I wish I’d radioed Von Zorn or Quade when I first got the dope on that Martian spore.”

“What was that?”

Gerry halted and frowned at the pilot. “I ran across it long ago in a Martian volcanic area. It’s microscopic, but it resembles these — these Prometheans. It absorbed energy directly from the volcanic activity. I saw them grow, Michaels, and reproduce. It’s no wonder the signals from the Moon have stopped.” The woman hurried away as a thought struck her. The radio transmitter was in a nearby cabin, and quickly she adjusted it for sending. Not for the first time she wished her lieutenant and fiancé, Tommy Strike, were along, but Strike had gone fishing for mariloca in the Martian canali, and she couldn’t spare the time to pick him up.

When Gerry, after studying the notebook sent her by stratosphere from the London Zoo, had noticed the possible danger, she had immediately manned the Ark with a skeleton crew and pointed its nose toward the Moon. She had thought of televising Von Zorn or Quade and warning them, but hesitated.

For that the Prometheans actually were dangerous was only a theory on Gerry’s part, and the possibility of Von Zorn’s ridiculing her wasn’t pleasant. Moreover, the president of Nine Planets would never believe the woman, would think it only a trick on her part to gain possession of the Mercurians.

Gerry went off to investigate firsthand. And, almost at her destination, she received the first warning broadcast from Von Zorn. After that events moved thick and fast.

Gerry kicked over a switch and leaned close to the transmitter.

“Calling Hollywood on the Moon. Calling Hollywood on the Moon!”

No answer. But Gerry had expected none. She went on, “Message for Anthony Quade. Carlyle of the Ark calling Anthony Quade of Nine Planets Films. Please relay this message to Quade. Message follows. Quote. Meet me at the Central Space port in twenty minutes. Bring Prometheans for experimental purposes. Signed, Gerry Carlyle. Unquote.”

She repeated the message several times, and then went back to pace the control room. It seemed an eternity before Michaels lowered the ship on a cleared space, faintly illuminated by car headlights.

He pointed through a porthole.

“Look at that mob. You’re not going out there, Miss Carlyle?”

“I am,” Gerry said grimly, buckling on a gun-belt. “So are you.” She handed a rifle to the pilot and led the way.

As the space port swung open a surging flood of humanity, terrified, shouting, screaming, pressed forward.

“Let us in. Let us in!”

“Ten thousand dollars for a passage.”

Gerry stepped back involuntarily. Then her stubborn chin jutted. She drew the gun, waved it menacingly. Her voice cracked out, cold and incisive.

“Get back. All of you!”

Michaels, behind her, lifted the rifle. The mob hesitated, and a man shoved his way through, a Promethean under either arm. Gerry recognized him. “Quade. Here!” she cried.

He broke into a stumbling run. The crowd broke and surged forward. Quade reached the space port a few steps before the first of the mob. Gerry hauled him into the ship, planted a capable fist on the nose of a man trying to scramble aboard, and dodged inside. Michaels slammed the port, locked it.

“Lift the ship,” Gerry snapped. The pilot hurried to obey. Quade stood silent, looking embarrassed. His face was grimy, and a long cut ran from forehead to chin where a flying splinter of glass had grazed him.

“In here,” Gerry said, and led the way to her laboratory. Once there she stood arms akimbo and glared at Quade.

His attempt to smile was not notably successful. “Okay,” he said. “Go ahead. Pour it on.”

“Not at all,” Gerry observed sweetly. “I’ve run into incompetence before.”

She made a hopeless gesture.

“I’ve got a comet by the tail. Damn it, Miss Carlyle, I’m responsible for all this. So far nobody’s been seriously injured, but in a few more hours the whole Moon will be dead. Unless —”

“Now you — listen to me,” Gerry said, the stubborn set of her chin presaging trouble. “I haven’t got the resources of Nine Planets Films behind me. When I want a new monster, I have to go out and fight for it. My men too risk death every time they follow me. That takes something, Tony Anybody with a few billion can use robots to collect specimens.”

The man winced.

“Oh. You guessed that.”

“Sure. Robots are the backbone of Nine Planets, aren’t they? Give me that animated firework.” She snatched a Promethean and reached for a magnifying lens. “No, I haven’t your resources. I can’t pick the finest brains in the System when I want to know something. But my knowledge is practical, Quade, and I got it from knocking around the planets for years.”

“We’ve shut off all the power,” Quade said hopelessly. “McColm — he’s the head of the labs — is superintending that. But once we turn it on again, the Prometheans will suck the electricity. There must be hundreds of them now.”

“This creature has a positive and a negative pole,” Gerry Carlyle told him. “And there’s a device to seal over the poles when they move around. That’s natural, since they came from a highly metallic world.”

“Yeah,” Quade said, “That’s why we couldn’t short circuit them.”

Suddenly Gerry smiled, but not pleasantly. “I can short circuit them,” she observed. “I can clean up the Moon for you in a jiffy.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes. I can destroy every Promethean here. Except one. I want one left alive.”

Quade didn’t answer. Gerry took a paper from her pocket and laid it on a table.

“Here’s a pen,” she said. “I can write contracts too.”

“What’s the squeeze?”

The woman’s eyes blazed dangerously. “The squeeze — as you inelegantly term it — is simply my fee for saving the moon, I want one surviving Promethean for the London Zoo. And I want your assurance that you won’t import any more from Mercury.”

“But Von Zorn —”

Gerry said angrily, “I could make this a lot harder for you if I wanted to. I’ll give you sixty seconds to sign that agreement.”

Quade scowled but signed. He dropped the pen and said grimly, “What now?”

“I’ll need a large cleared space. Where?”

“The Plaza.”

“Okay. Show Michaels how to get there.”

Without a word Quade went out. Presently the Ark grounded. Gerry was at a porthole in a jiffy. Looking out over the broad, parklike expanse, she nodded with satisfaction.

“Plenty of room. That’ll help.”

Gerry had an idea of how she could destroy the Mercurians. It was simple enough. More than one scientist on the Moon had already had a similar inspiration, but unfortunately power was needed to carry it out. And the, only power available was in Gerry’s Ark. It would be hours before any other ship arrived.

The woman locked the Prometheans in one of the numerous cages around the room, smilingly patted the contract — in her pocket, and set to work.

“The Prometheans, must be highly sensitive to electricity,” she said to Quade, who had wandered in. “Or to any source of power. They’ll be coming around here pretty soon.”

“What’s your plan?” Quade asked.

“I’m a trapper by trade, so I’m using a trap. The most primitive of weapons. As soon as I can set up a portable power plant —”

This didn’t take long, for Gerry had capable assistants. Quade, at the woman’s suggestion, went outside the ship and went through the gathering crowd, organizing an emergency police staff. A large area was roped off, and the streets leading into the Plaza were cleared. And now, in the distance, the first of the Prometheans was seen arriving in a blaze of sparkling glory.

Quade, who was in conference with some of the studio staff, returned to inform Gerry of the arrival. She brushed a strand of blond hair from her eyes and murmured absently, “Not ready yet. Keep ‘em away.”

She didn’t explain how, but nevertheless Quade went out and sent out a hurry call for a long wooden-handled shovel. Already the Prometheans were arriving in force. There was now no need for the ropes to keep the crowd back; the mob shrank away terrified from the blazing beauty of the creatures.

Faster they came, and faster. Men and women sought safety in flight. Only a few of the hardier men — many of them belonging to Quade’s personal staff, handpicked and efficient — remained. But even these could not withstand the onslaught for long.

Slowly Quade’s men were forced back to the Ark’s port. Under the impact of violent electric shocks gasping curses and groans went up. The space ship was the center of a flaming, whirling, incandescent glare of rainbow light. Flame-red, sun-yellow, eerie blue and green and violet, it was a fantastic spectacle of terrifying beauty.

Beauty that meant death.

Chapter XVII. Short Circuit

Gerry opened the port and said, “You can come in now.” She looked cool as a cucumber. Quade angrily suspected that she had spent a few minutes renewing her lipstick and touching up her hair while he and his men struggled against the Mercurians.

“Thanks a lot,” he grunted, following the others into the ship. A Promethean wobbled in after him, but a sharp kick disillusioned the creature and sent it scooting into the night. Quade slammed the port.

“Come on,” Gerry said. “We’re all ready.” She led him down a sloping passage and opened a door. Quade saw a large circular room, carpeted, apparently, with grass.

“This compartment has a sliding floor,” she said. “Sometimes we set — the Ark down over a monster, slide the floor back into position, replace the outer insulation, and we’ve got him safely.”

Quade was eyeing a portable power plant which had been set up near by. An iron plate lay flat on the ground, and Gerry pointed at this casually.

“The Prometheans have to unseal their poles when they feed,” she explained. “See that grounded wire? It’s just a device for short-circuiting. I’ll show you —” She called to Michaels presently he appeared bearing one of the creatures. Gerry took the Promethean and dropped him to the ground, where he remained still a moment.

Then he moved directly toward the power plant. His round body slid on to the iron plate. He reached up toward a bare, dangling wire — Puff.

“He’s dead,” Gerry observed. “Caught with his seals open. His condenser charge is gone just like that.”

And, sure enough, the Promethean lay flabby and motionless, all the gay fireworks gone, limp and obviously dead. Gerry kicked the creature off the plate. “Organize a bucket squad,” she called to Michaels. “And open the wall — two foot radius.”

Silently a gap widened in the space ship’s hull. Rainbow sparklings brightened as the Prometheans surged forward. Quade suddenly noticed that Gerry wore high rubber boots, and that the woman was eyeing him with a certain malicious amusement. With grimly set lips he took the pail she handed him and waited.

The Mercurians poured in through the gap. But only a few at a time could enter, and they sped in an unerring, narrow stream toward the power plant. And, like the first Promethean, they reached up toward the dangling wire, and — Puff!

“Scoop ‘em up,” Gerry commanded tartly. “We need elbow room here.”

Quade obeyed. Along the sloping corridor men stood at intervals, a bucket brigade that passed along empty pails as Quade sent up Promethean-filled ones. There were more of them than he had thought. Presently his arms began to ache, and the glances he sent toward Gerry, who was lounging negligently against the wall, were expressive.

“Keep your temper,” she advised. “You’re not out of the soup yet.”

Since this was true, Quade didn’t answer but bent to his task with renewed vigor. There must have been five or six hundred of the creatures from Mercury. But at last they were killed — all but a few too large to enter narrow opening.

At Gerry’s command, Michaels enlarged the gap so the rest of the Promes could surge in. Quade made a bound for safety, but the woman ahead of him and blocked the passage. “Don’t just stand there,” he said. “One of those things is heading for me.”

“Sorry,” Gerry said, and with a dexterous movement managed to propel Quade back, where he collided with a fat Promethean and was hurled to the ground by an electric shock. Muttering, he rose and watched the last of the creatures die. Gerry’s cool voice came from the passage. “That’s all. There isn’t any more.”

Simultaneously lights flared up all over Hollywood on the Moon. Michaels had sent out a reassuring message, and the power once more went racing through a maze of cables and wires. The jet starry sky faded and paled as the lighting system went into action. The air rectifiers lunged into frantic operation; the force beams flared out; the heating plates and coils glowed red and then white.

Quade followed Gerry into the control room. The woman sank down into a chair and lit a cigarette. “Well?” she inquired. “What’s keeping you?”

Quade bushed. “Not a thing,” he said. “Except — I want to say thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. I’ve got my fee,” Gerry’s sly sideward glance took in Quade’s somewhat flushed face. “There’s one Promethean left, and he’s tucked away safely in my lab.”

“You’re welcome to him. Only&” Quade’s voice became suddenly earnest.

“Miss Carlyle, do you realize what a picture this would make? Gerry Carlyle in The Energy-Eaters! Can’t you see that billing placarded all over the system. We could make it easily. One word from you and I’ll have our best scriptwriters grinding out a story. Have a special premier at Froman’s Mercurian Theater — it’d clean up. You’d have enough dough to build a dozen Arks. And we could shoot the pic in three weeks with double exposures and robots...”

“Robots!” Gerry bounced up, crushed out the cigarette viciously. But Quade failed to heed the warning signals.

“Sure. We can fake ‘em easily —”

“Mr. Quade,” Gerry interrupted sternly, “first of all, I should like you to understand that I am not a fake. The name Gerry Carlyle means the real thing. I have never let down the public, and I do not intend to begin now. And, once and for all, I will not make a fool of myself by appearing in one of your corny pictures”

Quade stared, his mouth open.

“Did you say — corny?” he asked unbelievably.

“Yes.”

“My pictures?”

“Yes,” Gerry said, pouring acid on the wound. “They smell.”

“That ends it,” Quade snapped. “Nine Planets will keep its agreement with you. Take your Promethean. Though I doubt if it will survive your company for long.” With that he turned and marched out of the Ark, leaving Gerry chuckling happily to herself.

However, if she, had seen the object Quade took out of his pocket with such care a few moments later, she might not have been so pleased.



Twenty hours later Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike strolled along Broadway. Strike had just treated to hot-dogs, and with the corner of his handkerchief wiped

mustard, from Gerry's nose. "Thanks," she said. "But don't interrupt. Tommy, do you know what this means to us?"

"What?"

"A fortune. Customers will come like flies — that Promethean will draw millions of 'em to the Zoo, and, they'll pay, too."

"Well," Strike said slowly, "I suppose so. Only I'm not sure you were right in turning down that guy Quade's, offer. You'd be a knockout in pictures."

Gerry snapped, "I don't wish to hear any more about that. You know very well that when I make up my mind to something, it's settled." She paused. "Tommy! You're not listening."

Strike was staring, eyes and mouth wide open, at a blazing neon-and-mercury marquee above the entrance to a Broadway theatre.

"Gerri — look at that!" he gasped.

"What?" Gerry demanded. "I don't — oh."

Strike read the sign aloud. "Scoop. Lunar disaster! See Gerry Carlyle capture the Energy-Eaters."

"Get tickets," the woman said weakly.

Inside the theater they had not long to wait. Presently the feature ended and the special newsreel came on. And it was all there — Gerry's arrival in the Ark, the exciting scenes at the Plaza filmed in eerie ultraviolet, even the final destruction of the Prometheans inside the space ship.

"Just look at me," Gerry whispered fiercely to Strike. "My hair's a mess."

"You look all right to me," Strike chuckled. "Wonder how he got those shots without your seeing the camera?"

"He had one inside his shirt — one of the tiny automatic cameras, with sensitized wire film. He was doublecrossing me all along. The worst of it is, I can't sue Nine Planets — Newsreel stuff is common property. Come on — let's

get out of here.”

They had to fight their way through the crowded lobby. As they emerged Gerry paused to eye two long queues that stretched far along Broadway. The rush, was beginning. Already radios and advertising gyroplanes were blaring: “See Gerry Carlyle capture the Energy Eaters! A Nine Planets Film.”

Strike couldn't resist rubbing it in.

“So when you make up your mind to something, it's settled, eh?” he said.

Gerry looked at him a long moment. Then a half-smile hovered on her lips as she looked around at the increasing crowd. “Well,” she said, “anyhow, I'm packing them in!”

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS

Chapter XVIII. Call of the Comet

THE GREAT lens in the Mount Everest Observatory had withstood the stresses of the coldest climate and the highest altitude on Earth. Nobody had foreseen that Gerry Carlyle would ever use it. But when she did, the baleful gleam in her eye was enough to chip the telescopes beryllium steel.

Gerry was mad. She had flown into a fury to keep from crying. As Catch-'emAlive Carlyle, the Solar System's greatest explorer, she dared never in her own estimation, be considered guilty of feminine weaknesses. What she wanted, she got, by virtue of a keen, alert, indomitable courage, and experience that covered practically every one of the Sun's planets.

Now, watching on the huge telescope visiplate the glowing fires of Almussen's Comet, she realized that she was losing the biggest scoop of her wild career.

The worst of it was that Gerry needed that scoop. The London Zoo paid her chiefly on commission. But she had to provide good, regular salaries for her staff. And she had never saved much, for there was always new equipment to buy, expensive research to pay for. The upkeep of The Ark alone was staggering. For months now Gerry hadn't found a new monster. The Ark was being completely overhauled and modernized, and money was getting low.

The last factor didn't bother her too much. She had to provide for her men, of course, but the real danger was losing her commission. She hated the idea of being idle in her beloved job when all the monsters in the System had not yet been captured and caged. The thrill of pitting her brain against the resources of alien worlds and incredible beings to bring them back to the Zoo alive, the excitement of skirting the brink of death and coming back unscathed, meant everything to her.

Now one of the greatest enigmas of interplanetary deep space was coming within reach. But Gerry couldn't move. She was earthbound as the most amazing scientific adventure of her lifetime was thundering into the void as Almussen's Comet swept Sunward.

Right now Gerry stood motionless in the middle of the room, which didn't much resemble an observatory. It was a small, well-furnished cubicle, the duplicate of a dozen others, each equipped with a visiplate connected with the gigantic telescope. She looked bitterly at the pallid fires of the comet, and could have stamped in frustrated annoyance.

A small televisor in the corner buzzed. "Calling Miss Carlyle... Call from London..."

The woman swung toward the device and touched a switch. On the screen, a man's worried face appeared.

"Well?" Gerry snapped.

"I'm terribly sorry," the face said apprehensively. "But the Jan Hallek Mercury expedition can't possibly be back for at least a month. And even then his ship would have to be overhauled thoroughly and specially adapted for your purposes and —"

Furiously, Gerry switched off the communicator. She resumed her pacing, cursing a fate that seemed to chain her to the Earth, at the same time the greatest opportunity of her lifetime sailed nonchalantly past through the skies, never to return.

Occasionally the televisor buzzed, and apologetic faces reported more sad news. Then the door opened and a tall, dark young man entered. He looked hot and harassed as he slung his dress cap halfway across the room and dropped into an easy chair.

"Well, Captain Strike?" Gerry's razor tongue sliced out. "Before you fall asleep, you might inform me of your progress."

Tommy Strike grinned wryly. "You know the answer, kitten —"

"Don't call me kitten."

"Cat," Tommy amended. "The Ark is absolutely out of the picture. Every motor in her hull's been torn completely apart, for checking over. She won't be going anywhere for a long, long time... And, by the way, I can see you're in an evil temper."

“I’m not!”

“So let me warn you not to take it out on me, because I’m not feeling very gay myself. On the slightest provocation, I’m going to turn you over my knee and give you a whaling.”

Gerry glanced keenly at the usually easy-going Tommy, and decided that he meant what he said. She smiled ruefully, and turned as the door opened once more.

A small man, with a face like a pallid prune, came in. Spectacles glinted from amid the wrinkles. A badly fitting toupee was askew on the head of Professor Langley of the Mount Everest Observatory.

“Um, Miss Carlyle,” said Langley, in a squeaky voice. “I have collected the data you desired.” He referred to a scrap of paper clutched in one hand, and began to read in a swift, monotonous voice. “Almussen’s Comet is one of the largest ever to enter the Solar System. Its nucleus is eight thousand miles, almost as large as that of Donati’s Comet of Eighteen Fifty-eight. And it seems to be much denser, probably dense enough to support the weight of a human being.”

“Tommy!” Gerry’s eyes were alight with excitement. “Do you hear?”

Strike nodded slowly, frowning. He realized that this information only made it harder for Gerry, because she couldn’t take advantage of it.

“Um. The nucleus is not quite as large as our own Moon. The comet seems to be one of the long period comets, or perhaps a wanderer of space, not a part of our System at all. In other words” — even Langley’s cold voice was pained — “we shall never see its return in our lifetimes.”

Gerry chewed her lip. Strike glanced at her and then quickly looked away.

“Cyanogen is present in great quantities, also sodium, common metals, such as iron and bauxite, and the hydrocarbons.”

“Hydrocarbons,” Gerry said. “That may mean — life.”

Langley knitted his brows. “On a comet? Rather fantastic, Miss Carlyle.”

“I’ve run across lifeforms existing in much less probable conditions,” the woman said stubbornly.

“And how would you reach the comet?” Langley asked.

“How do you suppose?” Gerry asked defiantly. “Crawl on my hands and knees?” But her voice was bitter — hurt and bewildered by her helplessness.

Chapter XIX. A Challenge for Gerry

Langley permitted himself the luxury of a faint smile.

“It would take a specially equipped ship. Comets don’t only shine by reflected light. The Sun’s light and electron streams also excite their tenuous gases. But more important, they are electrically charged. You must have protection against the electronic bombardment of the coma — which is much larger than the nucleus. A head may be from eighteen thousand to a million, nine hundred thousand miles in diameter, while the nucleus is from four hundred forty yards to eight thousand miles. It would be like entering the Sun’s chromosphere.”

“Not quite,” Gerry said thoughtfully. “It could be done. Am I right?”

The professor pondered. “Yes,” he admitted at last. “It might be done. And there might be life on the comet. But if so, it would be so utterly alien, that it would be incomprehensible to a human being.”

“What a scoop,” Gerry murmured ecstatically.

Repelled by this unscientific attitude Langley withdrew, ostentatiously shutting the door behind him. The woman turned to Strike.

“I know,” he said. “It’s tough. Not a ship in the System — ” He stopped suddenly.

“No,” Gerry sighed defeatedly. “Nothing. And no time to prepare one. Not a crate that would take us to the comet.”

“Mm-m.” Strike unpocketed a battered pipe and sucked at it, an enigmatic expression on his space-tanned face.

For a moment there was silence, while Gerry leaned back to scrutinize her man.

“Why the reticence?” she asked.

“Well, as a matter of fact there is a big ship being prepared to tackle the comet. I heard of it in a roundabout way. Supposed to be kept secret till the takeoff. Then there’ll be a great fanfare of publicity.”

Gerry clutched Strike’s shoulders.

“Why, you... Why didn’t you say so before? Who’s handling it? I’ll get in touch with ‘em right away...”

She paused. Tommy had mentioned a fanfare of publicity. He had been reluctant to broach the matter at all. A horrible suspicion seeped into her mind.

“Good Lord!” she cried. “Don’t tell me Nine Planets Pictures is disrupting my life again.”

Tommy Strike stood up.

“Now look, kitten. There’s no use losing your temper.”

“Well, blast me,” was all Gerry said. But she made it sound like a searing oath.

“In fact, it might be a good idea to swallow your pride and make a deal with ‘em. It’s your only chance.”

“Oh, is that so?” Gerry snapped. “Hollywood on the Moon. Nine Planets Films, Incorporated. The biggest bunch of crooked fakers in the System. They duplicate the lifeforms I’ve captured at the risk of my life — Venusian whips, Jovian thunderdragons. And how do they do it? They make cheap robots. Radio-controlled robots at that. That’s what gets in my hair, Tommy. I take all the risks, and they grab the credit and the cash.”

“They make good pictures,” Strike said. That was a tactical mistake.

“Good?” Gerry almost sputtered. “Corny, you mean. You can’t duplicate lifeforms even with biologically created robots. But the public goes to Nine Planets’ pictures and stays away from the London Zoo. Do you think that’s fair?”

“Oh, well,” Strike soothed, “this Quade, the guy who’s in charge isn’t such a bad egg, from all I hear. He ought to be willing to give us a lift.”

“Quade? Their ace trouble-shooter? The man who doublecrossed me by taking newsreel shots when I wasn’t looking?” Gerry looked ready to explode. But, suddenly and inexplicably, she quieted. A gleam came into her eye.

“I see,” she went on, after a pause. “Maybe you’re right. Quade ought to be willing to give us a lift. And if he does — if I once get on that comet — ” Gerry’s smile became sweetly ferocious. “Mr. Quade will find out just what it means to be doublecrossed.”

Strike’s jaw dropped. “Lord help Quade,” he whispered under his breath. “Lord help him.”

One day later, Gerry reached the Moon. She came unheralded, bursting upon the horizon of Nine Planets like a nova. Nobody was expecting her, and Tony Quade with his boss, Von Zorn, lolled unsuspectingly in a Turkish bath on Lunar Boulevard.

Everybody in the System wanted to visit Hollywood on the Moon, the most glamorous, fascinating, incredible city ever built. It lay on the other side of the Moon, away from Earth, in a vast hollow that volcanic activity had blasted out eons before. There, nestled under the Great Rim, glowed and sparkled Hollywood on the Moon, Mecca of the Movie Makers. It had the advantages of a perfect artificial atmosphere and climate, which therefore made it vacation-land for the elite and the socialite. For the studio men, it was a place of arduous, grueling, but utterly interesting work.

Here Nine Planets Films, Inc. had its headquarters. Here the interplanetary sagas were plotted and planned by ingenious script writers. Here the technical experts consulted, the experimental labs created robot-life-forms and artificial other-worldly conditions. And here Von Zorn ruled like a czar. He was the President of Nine Planets and Tony Quade was his ace man. When Von Zorn was in a spot, when experts said a picture couldn’t be canned, he sent for Quade. And Quade had always proved the experts wrong.

Quade was the one who got the first four-dimensional films ever made. He was the daredevil maniac who captured the spectacularly deadly Plutonian lifeforms on celluloid. He even shot the great Martian Inferno, the hottest SRO grosser in

years. Against her will and without her knowledge, he had once filmed Gerry Carlyle. After Gerry Carlyle it was only a step to a comet.

Though Quade was worried, he didn't show it.

There was no point in explaining to Von Zorn that the chances of returning from the comet alive were practically zero.

Quade listened hard, peering through clouds of steam. The acrid stimulation of Martian sour-grass tickled his nostrils. Weirdly swathed figures loomed momentarily through thin spots in the mist, then disappeared. There were strangely muffled voices, heavy breathing, the sound of wet feet slapping on glass-tile.

“And in the office it's spies everywhere,” Von Zorn said excitedly. “Try to keep secrets with gossip columnists and fan mag writers searching like vultures, and slickers from the other companies trying to scoop us. A Turkish bath is the only place I feel safe...Tony, we're set. The ship's almost ready. The special shields are done, and the equipment's being put in right on our own lot, the abandoned Thunder Men set near the Rim. But we've got to keep it quiet for awhile longer.”

Quade's lanky, hard-muscled figure stirred uneasily. His lean, tanned face was impassive as he studied the remarkable form of his employer. Quade was trying not to laugh.

Von Zorn resembled two eggs, the smaller atop the larger, with strange, limp appendages sprouting in the form of arms and legs. He was as peculiar a lifeform as Quade had ever filmed. No one would have guessed that inside that bristle-thatched head was one of the shrewdest executive brains of the System. Von Zorn dominated his whole gigantic plant, from the highest-paid star to the lowliest grip.

“Keep it quiet awhile longer,” Von Zorn repeated. “Scientists, reporters, everybody in the Universe will want to go along the minute they find out that we're tackling the comet. We have to refuse 'em, and that makes bad publicity.”

Von Zorn lived in terms of box-office receipts and publicity.

“When we do break the news, it's on the eve of the takeoff,” he continued. “No time for anybody to get their feelings hurt. See? Besides, this is a moving picture

venture, Tony. You're going to get the pix of a lifetime. Sensational background for our super-epic of cosmic adventure —”

“Yeah. I know.Call of the Comet . Starring so-and-so. Produced by so-and-so. And maybe a tiny, buried screen credit for Quade, cameraman.”

“No, I'm making you associate producer for this one,” cried Von Zorn, on the spur of the moment. “Maybe director, too. Who knows? Your name in lights —”

A door opened somewhere, and a draught of cool air surged in.

“Mr. Von Zorn,” a voice called. “Mr. Von Zorn!”

“Well?” Von Zorn yelled back, grateful for the interruption.

“There's a lady outside to see you. Says her name's Gerry Carlyle. That's what she says, honest.”

Quade looked at Von Zorn. Von Zorn looked at Quade.

“Tell her I'm out,” the film magnate yelped. “I'm speaking to nobody. I'm under a doctor's care. I'm a sick man!”

“She says if you ain't out in five minutes, she's comin' in,” the attendant said apologetically. .

“She wouldn't dare,” Von Zorn sputtered.

Quade suddenly intervened. “Don't kid yourself, Chief. That dame'll charge in here the way she walks into a pack of wild animals. We'd better take a shower and talk to her. Mr. Von Zorn's office in fifteen minutes,” he said to the attendant.

“But get this straight, Chief,” he said when they were comparatively alone again. “That rocket in skirts isn't going to join any expedition I'm running.”

Gerry and Strike were waiting as Von Zorn and Quade, freshly groomed and still smelling faintly of sour-grass, entered. Von Zorn strutted around his vast desk and eyed Gerry across its glassy expanse as one might scout an enemy across a battlefield.

“Ah, Strike,” he said. “Met you before, I think. Guess everyone knows everyone else except maybe you and Quade. Tony Quade, Strike.”

As the two men advanced warily to shake hands, they looked each other over very carefully. They were well matched physically, though Quade was perhaps a bit taller. Despite himself, Strike couldn't help liking what he saw before him.

Gerry started the ball rolling. “You owe me a debt of gratitude, Mr. Von Zorn, for that affair of the energy-eaters. It's probably bad taste to mention it, but I'm desperate to get to Almussen's Comet while it's still possible to do so.”

Von Zorn's simian face beamed at her proposal.

“Yes, indeed,” he said. “We haven't always seen eye to eye in the past, Miss Carlyle, but bygones can be bygones. If you, Strike and a few of your men want to go along, it could be arranged.”

Gerry rocked on her heels, jolted with amazement. This was too easy.

“You mean we can make a bargain?” she gasped.

“I mean I can make a bargain,” Von Zorn amended shrewdly.

“Chief,” Quade said urgently. “Remember what I told you.”

Nobody paid him the slightest attention.

“All right,” Gerry grudged. “You're calling the turn.”

“Well, first off, this is a movie expedition. The idea is to take pictures. After we have our background shots for later double-exposures, it's okay to mess around. I don't think there's any organic life on the comet. But if there is, you're the woman who can catch what's there. You bring back two of each lifeform you find there. One goes to Nine Planets, and the other to the London Zoo. But if you bring back only one specimen, it belongs to Nine Planets.

“It's for my own protection,” Von Zorn went on. “Your exhibits have got the public down on my synthetic movie monsters. If there are any real ones to be had, I'm using them in *Call of the Comet*. That's how I'm going to overcome public prejudice —”

“Chief!” Quade broke in.

“I agree,” Gerry said. Her eyes had taken on a keen glint. “Tommy, myself and six of my best men. We’ll have our equipment ready within twenty-four hours.”

Quade’s mouth was a single hard line. “Chief, I want to talk to you,” he began menacingly.

Von Zorn hesitated. When he glimpsed Tony’s narrowed eyes, he nodded.

“All right. Will you excuse us, Miss Carlyle?”

The woman smiled brilliantly and left, with Strike. As the door shut, Quade turned blazing eyes on his employer.

“I quit,” he stormed. “You can’t doublecross me like that.”

“Now, now.” Von Zorn raised placating hands. “Don’t jump to conclusions Tony. I have your best interests at heart. You know that.”

“Yeah? I told you once that dame slides in, I step out.”

“But why? You want to film this picture. It’s the biggest break you’ve ever had. Your name as associate producer? No, I’ll make it producer. Tony, I’ll let you in on something. I’ve planned this all along — to get Gerry Carlyle interested.”

“What?” Quade demanded in horror.

“Sure. Figure it out. Think of the publicity when Gerry Carlyle goes on a Nine Planets expedition to the comet. Our picture will be the box office sock of the century. It’ll break all records for that one reason alone. And you’ll have the credit.”

“I see,” Quade said slowly. He rubbed his lean jaw and eyed Von Zorn.

“Maybe... Well, we’ll see. I still don’t trust you. You’d cut your grandmother’s throat for the publicity. But I’m not going to stay here on the Moon and let Gerry Carlyle take over my job.”

“I’d hate to put somebody else in your place,” Von Zorn murmured gently.

“I get it. Okay, it’s a deal. But I can tell you this right now. That Carlyle dame is out to doublecross me. I can smell it.”

“Afraid of a woman?” Von Zorn taunted.

Quade smiled unpleasantly. “Afraid? Nope. I’m going to show Catch-‘emAlive Carlyle just what doublecrossing really means.”

He went out. Von Zorn looked after his ace man and blinked. His simian face twisted into a wry grin.

“Lord help Gerry Carlyle!” he whispered under his breath.

Chapter XX. Oil and Water

As the hours dragged past, it became apparent that Gerry and Quade were mixing like oil and water. The chief bone of contention lay in the preparations for the voyage. Despite the huge size of the supership, every available inch would be utilized for equipment.

What sort of equipment?

Gerry had her own ideas. As an explorer of some experience, she knew the vital necessity of preparing for every contingency. Gas-guns, complicated snares and traps, special lures, weapons, protective devices, a hundred and one other gadgets were rushed from the woman’s London headquarters through space to Hollywood on the Moon. Meanwhile, Quade grimly superintended the installation of special cameras, complicated lighting facilities, ranging from hydrocarbon to ultraviolet, cases of various lenses, telescopic, microscopic, spectroscopic, electroscopic...

“Hell,” snapped Quade to Gerry as they stood in the ship’s port, violently arguing. “The business is to film whatever’s on Almussen’s Comet. What’s the use of all this junk of yours? Do you think we’ll find dinosaurs?”

“We might,” Gerry said maliciously. “And if we do, you’d look swell trying to down one with a camera. It doesn’t pay to take chances in my business. You’ll learn.”

“Oh, I’ll learn, will I?” Quade breathed hoarsely. “Listen, young lady, I was

canning films from Venus to Pluto before you crawled out of your cradle.”

This was a lie, but Gerry chose to take it seriously. Her blue eyes widened innocently.

“You must tell me all about it sometime,” she pleaded. “Later, though. Right now I’m going to throw away that overgrown toy so I can find some room to get my hypnotic lure into the ship.”

She nodded distastefully toward Quade’s bloated three-dimensional camera.

“Hypnotic lure,” said Quade bitterly, eyeing an over-sized gadget composed chiefly of revolving mirrors and varicolored light tubes.

Tommy Strike wandered along at this moment. He marched quickly to the angry pair.

“Hello,” he said with forced geniality. “I was just going down to the Silver Space Suit for a bit. Come along, Gerry? Quade?”

“Can’t,” the movie man grunted. “Too busy. Things are getting in my hair.”

He cast a baleful glance at Gerry, who smiled radiantly and nodded at Strike.

“Be right with you, Tommy. I’ll clean up a bit.”

She departed in search of lipstick.

Quade asked intently, when the woman had gone, “Do you really like being around poison ivy? For two cents I’d throw up this business and go fishing. The mariloca are running now.”

“And you want to follow their example, eh?” Strike asked.

“It isn’t as bad as all that. You just don’t-er-understand Gerry.”

“Oh, so that’s it,” said Quade. “I was wondering. Hell, why does she want to fill the ship with her mousetraps when we need most of the space for camera equipment? We don’t know what conditions we’ll find on the comet, and we’ve got to be prepared for every emergency. A cyanogen atmosphere needs special

lenses and films.”

“Sure,” Strike placated. “You’re right as far as that goes. But Gerry’s right, too. She doesn’t know what sort of life we may find on the comet, if any. And we’ve got to be prepared for anything. Bullets don’t work on some creatures, and gas won’t work on others. You can lure whiz-bangs with tobacco smoke, but it takes infra-red light to attract a Hyclops.

“I’ve seen the time when Gerry’s forethought in taking along one little gadget, which we never expected to use, saved our lives and netted us big dough. Maybe you’ll get the best picture in the world, Quade. But it won’t mean anything if you’re killed because we didn’t bring the right weapon with us.”

Quade nodded. “Maybe. I see your point. Well, as long as that cyclone in skirts stops riding me, I can take it. I’ll try, anyway.

He strode away hastily as Gerry appeared, trim and dapper in jodhpurs and shimmering metalumen blouse. She looked ravishing.

“How can anyone so lovely have such a bad temper?” he murmured, steering Gerry toward a taxicab. “Some time you’re going to die of spontaneous combustion.”

“Oh, you’ve been talking to that animated camera,” the woman remarked. “Well, can you blame me? You know how much good equipment means.”

They were rolling along Lunar Boulevard when Gerry spoke again. “Well? Don’t you agree?”

“More or less.” Strike lit a cigarette by drawing deeply on it, so a speck of platinum black, embedded in the tobacco, was kindled into flame. “Less, if you want it. You’re only seeing your side, Gerry. After all, Quade’s job is to shoot a picture. Or the backgrounds, anyway. Put yourself in his place.”

Gerry wrinkled her nose distastefully and said not another word till they were seated in the Dome Room of the Silver Space Suit. Then she finally relented and smiled at Strike.

“You win,” she said. “I’ll be good. If you’ll dance with me.”

The orchestra was just plunging into the opening chords of that latest smash hit, *Swinging the Libration*. Gerry and Strike accordingly rose and liberated in the current mode. Gerry sighed.

“What’s the matter?”

“These jodhpurs,” the woman said disconsolately. “Wish I had on a dress — organdy-blue.”

By which it appears that *Catch-‘emAlive* Carlyle was somewhat feminine after all... .

Events marched ahead. Hollywood on the Moon raced against the comet’s thundering drive as it swept in toward the Sun. Nine Planets’ corps of scientists worked frantically. All the complicated machinery of the technical side of the movie industry swung into well-oiled cooperative movement. Bulletins were placed hourly on Quade’s desk.

But then a new and dangerous factor entered the situation — time.

The comet would swing extremely close to the Sun. Unchecked solar radiation would be fatal to any life on the comet.

An insulated ship can exist for a short time on Mercury, and even narrow-beam radio communication is possible there. But *Almussen’s Comet* would swing well within Mercury’s orbit. At that distance, the Sun’s tremendous radiations would instantly short-circuit a human brain coming into range. Not even the special armor would help. Moreover, the comet’s mass might set up solar tides. If that happened, the strange intergalactic wanderer would be swallowed in colossal cataracts of solid flame.

Quade and Gerry had only a few weeks, therefore, to complete their preparations, make the voyage, and achieve their aims.

Another danger that occurred to most speculative minds was luckily not apt to materialize. The small mass of the average comet could not upset the delicate balance of the Solar System. *Almussen’s Comet*, though, had a solid core, massive enough to raise energy storms on the Sun’s surface — and sufficient to deflect a large asteroid or even a small planet from its orbit, Jupiter was safe enough, and even Earth. But Mercury might succumb.

By a lucky chance, however, the comet would not pass sufficiently close to any of the inner planets to cause serious trouble.

Quade insisted that the ship be checked and triple-checked. He admitted frankly that he was apprehensive. If the vessel happened to be wrecked on the comet's surface, the inevitable result would be death when the Sun neared the smaller body.

Both Gerry Carlyle and Tony Quade had been in dangerous spots from Pluto to Mercury Hotside. But this was the most perilous voyage either had ever undertaken.

They did not underestimate the possibility of disaster. The electronic bombardment of the comet's coma might mean destruction at the very start of the quest. A special double hull had been constructed, which further increased the bulk of the unwieldy ship. But it had not been built for maneuverability, so that didn't matter.

Gerry was considerably irritated by Von Zorn's insistence on filming in detail all the preparations for the voyage. It seemed to her that the cameramen, at Quade's instigation, always took special pains to wait till her hair was mussed and her lipstick smeared.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the obstacles, the day of the takeoff at last arrived.

It was spectacular enough to satisfy even Von Zorn. Gerry, who was decidedly photogenic, was induced to pose for some pictures. Strike, Quade and the crew were included. But the human actors in the drama were dwarfed by the background, more impressive than any constructed set.

In the distance towered the ultra-modern pleasure and business buildings of Hollywood on the Moon — the Silver Space Suit, the studios, the great transparent globe of the sanitarium. Above everything else glowered the jagged ramp of the Great Rim that bounded the crater. Above, misty through the artificial atmosphere, glowed the stars. The Earth, naturally, was invisible. Only on the other side of the Moon could it be seen.

And in the foreground — the ship. Ovoid, squatty enormous, glistening under the arclights, it lay in the center of the field like a vast metallic jewel. And a jewel of science it was, with the best equipment that the resource of Von Zorn

could provide. At the last moment there had been a fanfare of publicity. A tremendous crowd was present to see the takeoff.

Gerry was bored, Quade irritated by the waste of time. But Tommy enjoyed all the fuss.

“Nice place,” said Strike pleasantly. “I think I’d make a swell movie star.”

“Doubling for a Venus glider?” Gerry inquired with heavy irony. “After all, I’m employing you, Captain Strike. A little cooperation —”

“Okay, buttercup,” Tommy said jauntily, to Gerry’s scarlet embarrassment, since Quade was within earshot. The latter said nothing, but his grin was most expressive as he continued on his way to the controls.

Chapter XXI. Trapped — Alive!

A flare of rockets thundered up, music boomed out, and the Silver Space Suit quartet began to chant the Spaceman’s Song. Antigravity screens quivered as energy pulsed through them from the powerful motors.

In the control room, Gerry was flung into Strike’s arms as the ship lurched. Quade’s fingers flickered rapidly over a score of buttons. His grin had vanished, his jaw jutted noticeably. There was sudden tension in his attitude.

The vessel swung heavily to the left, then to the right. Abruptly it bucked like a bronco. Then it regained an even keel, and slowly, heavily, it began to mount

“Whew,” said Quade without relaxing. “What a crate. You can’t maneuver the damn thing at all. If we’d been using old-style rockets, we’d have cracked up muy pronto.”

“But we can reach the comet, can’t we?” Gerry said worriedly.

“Yeah. We do have speed. But no maneuverability. It’ll be plenty risky, piloting this jalopy through the asteroid belt.”

Quade’s lean face was grim as he studied the visiplate showing his course.

“We head out and intercept the comet in the major planet zone,” Strike said.

“That’ll give us a certain amount of time before the comet gets too close to the Sun.”

“I’m jamming on acceleration,” Quade nodded. “But we can’t meet the comet head on. We’d pass it — we couldn’t decelerate swiftly enough. We’ve got to curve around, slanting through the coma, and that’s the most dangerous part. To do that we had to sacrifice either protection or maneuverability, and we’ve plenty of protection. But not enough, maybe, if we slant through the coma instead of driving straight in. I don’t know how much electronic bombardment the hull will stand.” He shrugged wryly.

Quade was right. It was a perilous venture. Most ships, with their controlled gravity-screens, were able to turn or stop on a micron. But the bulk of this special vessel defeated its own purpose to some extent. She was a bulking, lumbering, leviathan, and yet potentially vulnerable to the dangerous menace of the comet. Now she streaked out from the Moon with mad disregard for trespassers in her path.

Space traffic had been warned. A lane had been cleared. An intricate chart and map was before Quade, citing the orbit of every known asteroid and meteor in his route. The hull repellers were turned on full power, to give warning of any large body nearby. No other precautions could be taken, unless the crew wore space armor day and night.

It was the asteroid belt which provided the greatest obstacle. The outer hull was riddled by hundreds of punctures. A smaller vessel could have slid through the uncharted meteorite swarm. Quade’s craft could not, though he managed to avoid the main body, which would have ruined the ship completely.

The repellers blew out with a terrific crash under the strain of trying to throw off countless small but massive bodies. But the second hull, built of super-steel, withstood the slackened speed of most of the interplanetary missiles. A few got through, but emergency valves were immediately employed.

Two gravity-screens were destroyed

The ship thundered on amidst the stars. Inside the control cabin, there was blank silence. Quade, Gerry, and Strike looked at one another in dismay.

Quade was the first to recover. He flicked over an audiophone switch and yelled

commands. Emergency galvanized him into an energetic dynamo.

“Morgan, mobilize the crew. Get a report right away. Let me know the extent of the damage. Prepare space suits for outside repairs.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Outside repairs?” Gerry said. “We’re nearly at the comet.”

“So what?” Quade asked. “We’re not taking this boat into the coma with a weakened hull. Even after repair it’ll be plenty risky.”

“But we may enter the coma any time. If your crew is outside then”

Her pause was significant.

“It’ll be a volunteer job,” Quade replied grimly. He turned to the audiophone again. “Well?”

“All the men have volunteered, Tony,” Morgan reported briefly. He went on to list the damage.

“Issue space suits. Put enough men inside to take care of that job. Get volunteers to go outside. Be with you right away. Send up an emergency pilot to handle the ship.”

“Oh. You’re going out too,” Gerry said.

“Yeah.”

“So am I,” Tommy Strike remarked happily. “Every little bit helps.”

He turned to the door.

“Tommy!” Gerry cried. “No. You can’t.” She hesitated, breathing hard. “If you do, I’m going too.”

Quade intervened. “We need every man we can get. But volunteers only. Strike doesn’t have to go.”

“Listen, Gerry, I’m going out and you’re going to stay here,” Tommy said. “You

can help by piloting the boat, so the emergency pilot can go outside with us. As Tony says, we need every hand.”

Gerry, about to remonstrate, caught Quade’s eye. There was a satirical look in it, as though the movie man expected Gerry to display some ‘feminine’ reaction, perhaps even throw a fit. The woman’s lips tightened.

“Right,” she said succinctly. “Scram, boys.”

Quade and Strike went out. Gerry turned to the controls. Her gaze went to the visiplate, to the glowing menace of the comet dangerously near. A red spark on the screen showed the progress of the ship. Gerry blinked rapidly.

Meanwhile, Quade was mobilizing his men. Some were already working on the wall of the ship, welding on emergency patches hastily brought from the storerooms. Others were struggling into space suits and lining up before the airlocks. Some were entering the inner hull of the craft, protected by their armor, bearing with them the necessary tools.

Most of the welding machines were mounted on universal ball-bearing tripods of light metal that could be rolled easily across the hull. In each device was a small gravity-control unit, so the machine could be fixed firmly in place for the actual repair work. Quade superintended the exodus.

Outside the airlock, clad in his armor and transparent helmet of flexible glass, he started the first unit of men at the ship’s prow. It would have been impossible to locate each microscopic puncture in the huge area of the hull. But as the crew emerged, each picked up a portable tank, equipped with a flexible hose which ended in a round disc, easily seven feet in diameter.

A man would place this disc flat against the hull, turn a nozzle in the tank, and walk quickly forward, dragging the hose after him. The mass of the ship, coupled with the suits’ gravityunits, made this means of progression possible. In the trail of each disc, a smear of sticky substance gleamed whitely, congealing immediately in the vacuum of space. Soon a good portion of the hull was completely plated with the stuff.

Tony Quade barked an order into his suit’s audiophone. Inside the vessel, a man turned a screw, letting into the forward compartments of the hull a special gas that expanded swiftly. Where punctures occurred in the outer hull, the elastic

coating exploded into huge bubbles, black in contrast to the surrounding whiteness. These marked the goal of dozens of men, hurrying toward the punctures with their welding units.

It was a remarkable example of well-trained coordination. Strike, busy dragging a hose and disc toward the stern, was impressed. He looked at Quade with renewed respect. More than once, he glanced ahead at the tremendous sweep of the comet, blotting out half the heavens.

Black void, star-speckled, lay all around. The men worked in airless emptiness, with the Sun a far disc astern. The pallid glare of Almussen's Comet threw their weirdly elongated shadows grotesquely along the hull. In the absence of air the sharp contrast between light and darkness was striking. The helmet lights, naturally, threw no beams, since there were no air-motes to reflect the illumination.

Inside the ship Gerry Carlyle sat at the controls, her face drained of all color, and grimly drove the vessel at top speed toward the comet. Inexorably the red dot on the visiplat screen crept toward the white boundary of the coma. When it entered it, any man still outside the ship would die instantly under the terrific electronic bombardment.

And Tommy Strike was out there. That was the only thought she could get through her mind.

Every man in the crew realized the peril. Tony Quade had grimly explained the dangers. But not one thought of giving up his job, though the comet was the target of apprehensive glances. Welding machines clamped pneumatically against the hull. Pale fires sputtered and blazed. Slowly, in an eternity, the crippled giant was mended.

But its race through the void continued unchecked. In the control room, Gerry Carlyle gnawed her lips and watched the red dot leap swiftly toward the white circle of the comet's head.

Two inches lay between. At this speed, the gap would be bridged all too soon. Gerry's hand hovered momentarily over a button, and then drew back. No. Deceleration must not begin yet. But there was so little time!

The audiophone skirled. Quade's voice rasped out, clipped and staccato.

“What’s the distance? How much time have we?” Gerry made a quick computation and told him. The movie man whistled.

“Yeah. Well, follow the course. See you soon.”

“Quade — ” Gerry said.

“What?”

“Nothing,” the woman whispered, and turned back to the controls. There were dark shadows under her eyes. Danger for herself she could face without flinching. But this was something entirely different. If Strike died under the electronic bombardment, it would be her hand that had killed him. Strained reasoning, perhaps — but Gerry loved her man.

She looked at the visiplat. Suddenly she became conscious that she had been holding her breath for some time. The woman exhaled deeply and tried to relax. It was useless.

The red speck crawled toward the comet. It was less than an inch away.

Half an inch.

All the future crawled by her. Gerry was immobile at the controls. There was hell in her eyes. No sound came to her from the outside hull. She could guess nothing of what was happening there. And that was, perhaps, the worst. She didn’t know whether Strike was still alive or not. Should she call Quade on the audiophone?

A quarter of an inch, and the gap still narrowed.

The red speck touched the white circle.

Gerry’s iron control snapped. She flicked a switch, called: “Quade! We’re in the coma —”

“Hold it, kid,” said a low voice behind her. The woman whirled, pivoting on her seat. Tommy Strike, disheveled but grinning, was standing on the threshold, unzipping his space suit. Behind him came Quade, his face glistening with perspiration.

Gerry's reaction was instantaneous.

"It's about time," she snapped. "I've been —"

And then the tornado struck!

Only a supership could have withstood it even for a moment. The electronic bombardment would have destroyed an ordinary liner instantly. Gerry spun back toward the control panel. Her slim fingers played the keyboard like a pianist's. The vessel rocked, shuddered, swayed, screaming in tortured agony.

No meteorite-storm, this. The very fabric of matter was the target for a blast of pure, unadulterated energy that raved and tore at the hull. Refrigerators rose into a shrill, high-pitched whine of incredible power.

Nevertheless the outer hull glowed red. The weak patches flared into white incandescence.

The skeleton of the ship strained and stretched as though on the rack. Girders and struts of toughest metal screeched. Gerry felt a warning tingle in her fingertips.

Quade sprang to the audiophone.

"Special suits on," he shouted. "Double-quick, every man!"

He dragged three black suits from a locker, threw one to Strike, donned one himself, and pushed Gerry from the controls with little tenderness.

"Get into it," he snapped, his mittened hands manipulating buttons. "Hurry."

Gerry obeyed. She knew that not even the ship's armor could entirely withstand the terrific bombardment of radioactivity. Too much of it would short-circuit a brain, unless protected by a helmet such as Gerry was hastily putting on.

Usually a space ship is silent. But now it was bedlam. The motors keened in rhythmic, throbbing pulsations. The visiplate glowed and paled. It showed nothing but a racing flood of white light. The instruments and gauges were haywire.

“Blind flying,” Quade grunted. “If we crack up —”

He turned the ship into a narrowing spiral and began to decelerate. A bell rang warningly.

“One of the patches has gone out,” Strike said. “Listen. I can go inside the hull with a welder and repair it.”

“Wouldn’t work,” Quade snapped. “You wouldn’t last three seconds.”

“My armor —”

The movie man merely shook his head silently and bent over the controls. The ship drove on doggedly, battling an environment that no space craft had ever encountered in history. Searing, blasting fires of pure energy battered at the hull. Instruments were useless. Exposed metal began to glow with dim, faint fluorescence.

Quade was worrying about his precious film. Raw celluloid would have been rendered useless minutes ago. He had known that in advance. The special thin-wire film he had taken in lieu of it might resist the bombardment. But then it might not. There was no way to tell.

Suddenly, without warning, it was over. The crackling thunder of the storm died. The visiplate gave a last flare and became normal. It showed —

The nucleus of the comet! Something that had never been seen before by any human being.

Quade had a brief impression of a pale mass expanding with terrifying speed, a globe that rushed toward him like a thunderbolt. Small at first, it grew nearly to the Moon’s size before he could decelerate. It was dangerous business. Swift deceleration would cause something worse than the bends — caisson disease — and a crack-up would mean insanity, death.

Quade swung the ship aside, circling the comet’s body in a wide orbit. He could as yet make out no features of the sphere beneath him. The ship was moving too fast. He touched buttons.

The quick deceleration punched him in the stomach and slammed him against

the padded control panel. Gerry and Strike went flying across the room, to bounce off the cushioned walls. That was the worst of it.

Quade pushed more buttons. The ship slowed down and spiraled inward. It wobbled badly. More of the gravity-screens had blown out.

“We’ve got to land for repairs,” he said briefly. “Strike, check up on the damage.”

Tommy nodded and went out. Gerry came to peer over Quade’s shoulder at the visiplat.

“It looks — dead,” she said. “No mountains or bodies of water. Just a featureless sphere, smaller than the Moon.”

“Featureless?” Quade retorted. “Look over there.”

Rising from the pale surface beneath them was a black structure, tiny in the distance, resembling a huge monolith or tower. It flashed past and was gone.

The vessel slanted down swiftly. It paused, hung in mid-air, dropped to a clumsy, lopsided landing.

“Whew!” Quade leaned back in his seat, relaxing for a few moments. “What a job.”

He removed his helmet and wriggled out of the special suit.

“Well, we’re here,” he announced, sighing with relief.

Gerry watched Tony crunch a caffeine citrate tablet between his teeth and swallow it wryly.

“There’s life here, Quade. That tower —”

“Looks like it. But we’ve got to take precautions.”

“Exactly. The air here can’t be breathable. I’ll find out.”

She examined the automatic atmosphere analyzer.

“Cyanogen,” she said. “We can’t breathe it, of course. We’ll need space suits outside the ship at all times.”

Quade pondered. “What sort of lifeform can live in cyanogen?”

“Why not cyanogen instead of oxygen? I can’t guess what the lifeforms might look like. But there must be life. That tower proves it.”

“First of all, though, we need rest and repairs,” Quade said. “We don’t want to be marooned here when the comet reaches the Sun.” He barked orders into the audiophone, and rose to superintend matters. “None of the crew was hurt. That’s lucky.”

Events marched. For the nonce, Gerry was left out of things, and she didn’t like it. Even Tommy Strike seemed to ignore her. He was always busy inside the hull, welding on a patch. The huntress wandered about for a time, frustration mounting within her.

At last she decided to take matters into her own small but capable hands. After all, she wasn’t merely the supercargo.

She donned a space suit, pocketed a gas-gun and an explosive-projectile pistol, and let herself into a space-lock. The outer valve slid open. Gerry stepped out, closing the portal after her.

Loose, gritty gravel crunched under her booted feet. She looked toward a sharply curved horizon of low, rolling dunes, all apparently composed of the same substance. No vegetation was visible.

Well, that was logical enough, she thought. A comet, being made of a lot of loose particles bound together by mutual attraction, would have a fairly solid core. But the surface should be pretty much like deep, loose gravel. The stones themselves resembled granite — hard, gray, rounded by eons of friction.

Gerry looked up. A little thrill of awe shook her.

No sky stretched above. A flood of white flame was her heaven. She was inside the comet — within the coma! The vault above her was neither blue nor the starry black of space. It was pure white, seething and crawling in strange, vast tides, rippling in amazing perpetual motion.

These were all — the pale glory of the sky, the gravel dunes all around, and, behind Gerry, the towering bulk of the ship. But the woman had marked her direction well. She stepped out confidently in the direction where the black tower had reared.

She was, perhaps, too confident. But after all she was Catch-‘emAlive Carlyle. She had made certain that, if necessary, she could communicate with the ship by her suit’s audiophone.

Gerry Carlyle, the first human being to stand on a comet’s surface. A little smile touched her red lips. That really meant something.

She hiked on doggedly. It was hard going, and the loose gravel made the muscles of her calves ache. She consulted a magnetic compass, which wasn’t working. She shrugged and continued trudging. Gerry, of course, had an excellent sense of direction.

But the rolling dunes were utterly featureless, bathed in the shadow’s white glow. The nucleus was a land of perpetual daylight...

On she went, and on. How far was the tower? A warning premonition touched Gerry. Perhaps she had been too rash. After all, this was a new world, with unknown and probably dangerous lifeforms. But a glance at her weapons reassured her. She went on.

Something like a blue basketball rolled down the slope of a dune toward her.

Gerry stopped immediately. Her gloved hands went with deceptive casualness to the butts of her guns. She stood alert, waiting.

A blue basketball, a foot or so in diameter, stopped ten feet from Gerry. She was able to scrutinize it closely.

The bluish tinge was light, she saw, and the outer skin was translucent, almost transparent. Inside the globe a smaller black object floated, seemingly in liquid. There were no signs of any organs. Eyes, ears, respiratory apparatus, the thing had none of these.

It started to grow, with the speed of a nightmare mushroom.

It expanded to four feet in diameter before Gerry reacted. She read menace in the creature's actions, or thought she did. Her hand snapped the gas-gun from her belt.

Immediately the sphere vanished, disappeared like the figment of a dream. Where it had been was nothing.

Gerry stood frozen, wondering if the creature had exploded, or departed with incredible speed. But, instinctively, she knew that neither of these guesses was the correct one.

Some instinct made her turn. The blue sphere was rolling slowly toward her from the opposite direction, now nearly six feet in diameter.

Gerry pointed the gun, expecting her enemy to vanish. It did, promptly and thoroughly. The woman whirled. Two blue globes, now ten feet in diameter, were bearing down on her.

The interior body within the outer membrane had not expanded, and was still about six inches in diameter.

Gerry fired. The pellet hit the nearer of the things. Anesthetic gas spurted in a compact cloud. It did not do a bit of damage. The globe expanded still further and advanced purposefully.

Gerry tried the explosive pistol. It was equally useless, for an entirely different reason. True, it blew the sphere to fragments, but when Gerry turned, six new ones, large and bluish, were stealthily approaching.

"It isn't real," Gerry said desperately to herself. "I'm going insane."

She suddenly thought of the audiophone. As she was about to use it, the nearest of the monsters arrested her attention.

On its aquamarine surface a picture was forming. It took shape, color, and size.

A three-dimensional reproduction of Gerry Carlyle appeared there.

"Good Lord," the woman whispered. "Are they intelligent, after all?"

Cautiously, she eyed her double. The reproduction of herself bent into a hoop-shape and began to roll rapidly forward.

On the screen of the globe's bluish outer membrane, the scene was amazingly vivid and realistic.

Then the pseudo-Gerry rose and began to walk, stiffly and jerkily. Gerry herself caught the idea. The monsters moved about by rolling. They must be wondering why this strange visitant did not progress in the same manner.

An idea occurred to Gerry. If she could make friends with the creatures, even lure one to the ship, it would be a considerable achievement.

She lifted one arm in the immemorial gesture of peace.

It was misunderstood. The nearest of the globes expanded to twenty feet, jumped forward, knocked Gerry flat. She clawed out her gun and blew it to bits, while trying to rise.

Another sphere materialized in the empty air above her. It smashed on her helmet, knocking the weapon from her hand. Its outer membrane folded elastically around the woman's space suit. She was lifted, struggling frantically.

The sphere began to roll up a gravel dune. Gerry caught flashing alternate glimpses of light and darkness.

She managed to turn on the audiophone and yell for help.

There was only a faint buzzing sound. The device was broken. The banging it had received had disrupted its delicate mechanism.

Catch-'em Alive Carlyle had been caught — alive!

Chapter XXII. Mad World

Gerry wasn't missed from the ship immediately. There was too much to be done. Not even Tommy Strike noticed that she was gone until considerable time had elapsed. By that time, of course, it was too late.

"I've learned the value of a getaway," Quade told Tommy, in the midst of a

hubbub of repair. “If we run into real trouble, we want to be able to scam. There’s no use filming and capturing lifeforms if we get stuck on the comet when it gets close to the Sun.”

Strike nodded. “Right you are. But things ought to be well under control by now, eh?”

“They are. Where’s your side-kick?” Quade demanded.

“I’ll find out.” Tommy went away. When he returned he looked puzzled, worried. “She’s gone. And a suit’s gone, too.”

Quade swore helplessly. He turned to an audiophone and sent out a QRZ call.

“Calling Gerry Carlyle. QRZ-QRZ-Calling Gerry Carlyle.”

There was no response.

“Well,” Quade said at last, “we’ll make sure she’s not in the ship. But I feel pretty sure she isn’t.”

“She doesn’t answer the call,” Strike observed. “That means she can’t.”

There was orderly confusion. Presently a half-dozen men issued from the ship, clad in grotesque lightweight armor, flexible but airtight. Quade and Tommy Strike led the group.

“We can’t take the ship,” the movie man pondered. “The repairs aren’t finished, and it’s too bulky to maneuver easily. I want no chances of a crack-up till the final takeoff. We’ll have to depend on our legs. The portocars are no good on this gravel.”

“Which way?” Strike asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine. Can’t see much from here.” Quade took a periscope from his kit, stretched it out, and peered through the eyepiece. “No soap. There’s a high dune. Let’s go up there.”

They did. But nothing was visible.

“Let me — ” Strike began. He paused. His jaw dropped. He glared down into the valley they had just left. “Gerry.”

The others followed the direction of his shaky, pointing finger. Gerry Carlyle was down there, her red hair disheveled within the transparent helmet. Clad in bulky space armor, she came running in panic up the slope.

But she wasn't getting anywhere!

Her legs pumped up and down. Her body was bent forward at a sharp angle. Racing as hard as she could, it was all she could do to stay in one place.

Then she vanished.

Strike and Quade looked at each other, gasped, stared back to the valley. Bleak, desolate, and empty, it lay washed in the white glare of the surging skies.

“It was Gerry, wasn't it?” Tommy gulped.

“Like Alice,” Quade replied, completely flabbergasted. “She had to run faster and faster to keep in one spot... What sort of place is this, anyway?”

“Think it could have been a mirage?” Strike asked hopefully.

Quade led the way down the slope. He pointed to unmistakable footprints, dents in the gravelly ground.

“Mirages don't do that. It was solid. Gerry Carlyle was there, and she vanished.”

Without warning, the tower materialized. Fifty feet away it sprang into sudden existence. A high, huge monolith of black, stone or metal, it was featureless, save for a gaping door and a gleaming bright sphere at the summit. As unexpectedly as it had come, it disappeared.

“Phantoms,” Quade said helplessly. “But three-dimensional, solid, real. Radio transmission of matter?”

“That tower!” Strike said. “We saw something like it from the air.”

“It was back in that direction, Chief,” one of the men broke in. “Not too far to

walk.”

“Okay,” Quade replied. “Hop to it. Remember, we’re in a cyanogen atmosphere. Helmets on at all times. Keep your guns ready.” He called the ship and told Morgan his plans. “Take charge till we get back. If we don’t make it before the deadline, take off without us.”

None of the other men made any objection to this. Grimly they shouldered their packs and followed Quade and Strike down the valley.

It promised to be a dull journey. But that was only at first. Strike was the one who first caught sight of the blue sphere.

It rested on top of a dune, motionless, resembling some strange form of plant life. Warily they approached it. It was a ten-foot globe of translucent membrane, with a black nucleus inside that floated in some liquid.

“Think it’s alive?” Strike asked.

“If it is, it breathes cyanogen. If it breathes.”

Quade reached out to touch the thing — and it vanished.

It stayed vanished. Five minutes later the men gave up and continued their journey. Soon after this they encountered another sphere, similar to the first, but reddish instead of blue.

Quade approached within a few feet. Cautiously, trying not to make any sudden motion, he turned on his audiophone broadcaster. He made conciliatory noises. The globe shivered, and a picture formed on its surface.

It was a duplicate of Quade.

“It’s a mirror,” Strike said softly.

“No. Look at that.”

The image of Quade was moving. It extended its arms and bowed, though the original made no motion. It jumped up and down, and then vanished as the membrane went blank. The picture had been perfectly distinct, three-

dimensional.

Another picture formed. This time it showed the space ship.

It also vanished. The sphere increased in size like an inflated balloon, and the men sprang back in alarm. But no hostile move was made. Instead, the thing disappeared.

In its place stood a model of the space ship. It was no more than six feet high, but complete in each detail.

This vanished, also. The original sphere, or a duplicate of it, reappeared. It shrank to a few inches and was gone.

“I will be damned,” Quade said, slowly and emphatically. “It can’t be happening. The thing’s a super motion-picture projector.”

“Intelligent?” Strike asked.

“Dunno. That membrane — I’ve a hunch it’s composed of evolved, highly adaptable cells, which take the place of our own normal senses. Respiration, vision, and so forth may be accomplished by those cells. Communication — they seem to do it visually, by projecting pictures of thought-images on their membranous surface.”

“But how can they vanish like that? And assume different shapes? That thing took the form of our space ship. Maybe of Gerry, too.”

Quade made a despairing gesture. “Too deep for me, Strike. I think the key’s in that black tower we saw. Let’s get going.”

An eternity of plodding, laborious marching ensued. Overhead white fires of the comet blazed, twisting in strange, titanic tides. The terrain underfoot was monotonous beyond description. Inside the suits, the men perspired and swore under their breath.

A creature like prehistoric Tyrannosaurus Rex leaped from nowhere. It stood kangaroo-like on its hind legs atop a dune, and stared around, its reptilian, flat head revolving slowly. It was at least twenty-five feet high. But that wasn’t the most amazing part of the apparition.

Strike seized Quade's arm.

"That's a Venusian whip," he yelled. "A Venusian monster! Here — on the comet."

"You're crazy," Quade said.

Then he saw it. His eyes bulged. "It — it can't be real," Strike said desperately. "It can't be."

The whip settled the problem by sighting the men. Flicking out its long, prehensile tongue, it charged down the slope. The thunder of its progress shook the ground. It was certainly no phantom. Strike jerked his rifle to his shoulder and fired. The giant reptile flung back its head, hissed with ear — shattering shrillness. But still it continued its onrush.

The men were well-trained enough not to give way to panic. They scattered, each unlimbering his weapon. They evaded the monster's charge, but the prehensile tongue flicked out like greased lightning and rasped over Quade's suit as he sprang away. The guns bellowed out with staccato roars.

The whip, its head blown completely off, ran around in a vast circle. It took a long while before the minor brain in the tail-end of its spine brought it the realization that it was dead. Then, abruptly, it toppled over. The great tail continued swishing, the muscles twitched under the scaly hide.

"Phantom?" Quade said bitterly. "I don't think so. It isn't vanishing, is it?"

"I don't get it," Strike mused. "A Venusian lifeform on the comet. Somebody else might have forestalled us. But why bring a whip here?"

There seemed to be no solution to the problem. Nor was it possible to examine the giant carcass closely. Muscular reaction still made it a bundle of potential dynamite, twitching and jerking as it did at unexpected intervals. So the men resumed their march.

They were unquestionably nervous, and Quade could not blame them. He himself jumped slightly when Strike cried out: "Say, I just thought of something. How can an oxygen-breathing whip live in a cyanogen atmosphere?"

There was no possible answer to that, of course.

The next arrival was the red sphere, or a duplicate of it. It appeared on the summit of a dune, rolled down toward the Earthmen, and suddenly hesitated. From empty air around it appeared a dozen bluish globes, converging on the original one. They formed a milling, chaotic group of bubbles. When they drew away, the red one was gone. A deflated, punctured skin lay on the gravel, and colorless ichor was running out of it.

A score of reddish globes materialized from the air. The blue ones began to roll rapidly away, the newcomers in furious pursuit. Both groups scooted over a rise and disappeared, this time in a somewhat more logical manner.

“Didn’t see us, I guess,” Strike said.

“No... The blue ones seemed down on the red ones, and vice versa. Two different tribes or species, perhaps. But the color seems to be the only difference.”

“I wonder if they’re intelligent,” Strike persisted.

“It’s difficult to say,” Quade replied thoughtfully as he trudged on, plowing through the gravel. “It doesn’t seem so, but their thought-processes may be so entirely alien to ours that there’s probably no common ground to meet on. There are vast gaps even between the System’s planetary lifeforms.

“Originally the Arbermius spores, drifting through the void, may have created life. But adaptation and environment played a tremendous part. Besides, I doubt if any sort of spore could get through this comet’s coma. Microscopic bodies, shoved around by radiation, would be repelled by the electronic barrier. I told you we might run into almost anything here. We’re outside normal boundaries — almost outside our known Universe.”

“Are you telling me?” Strike replied bitterly. “Look! I might swallow a whip, but — this is too much.”

Quade didn’t believe what he saw. The other men were stupefied with amazement. They had topped a dune. In the valley beneath them squatted a vast bulk. It was alive, but it wasn’t homogeneous. It was a freak, a sport, and an impossible one.

It had the body of an elephant, gaudily striped with a zebra's markings. It had the neck of an ostrich, unduly elongated. Its thin, awkward legs resembled those of a giraffe. And atop that lean, gawky neck was — the head of Tommy Strike.

It was quite unmistakable, to the last freckle and lock of disordered hair falling over the tanned forehead. It looked into space with a wildly vacuous air, turned toward the Earthmen. The colossal hulk writhed, struggled. For a second it stood erect. Then the frail legs splintered, and the torso came crashing down. It struggled in agony.

Incontinently, it vanished.

“All right,” Quade said to the befuddled Strike. “That settles it. The whip was a known lifeform. This wasn't.”

“The component parts were.”

Quade refrained from the obvious rebuttal. “Yes. But nothing like that, in toto, ever existed in any universe. It was created, somehow, and it disappeared into thin air. The question is how?”

“Dunno. I think the question's why?”

Quade resumed his forward march.

“The answer to both is in the black tower, I'm certain. It shouldn't be far away now.”

They saw it long before they reached it, a colossal structure rearing from the gravelly surface of the comet. It seemed entirely deserted. It was a duplicate of the phantom monolith that had appeared some time before. The same gateway yawned uninvitingly. The same shimmering, metallic sphere crowned the summit, crawling with unknown but potent force.

“Those red and blue globes never built that,” Strike said emphatically. “It was built by hands, or their equivalent.”

“Maybe the ancestors of our little friends did it,” Quade said. “That tower may have stood there for a long, long time. Besides, it might have been built by machinery.”

“Machines? Why should the globes use ‘em? That outer membrane of theirs serves every purpose. They probably absorb food through it, if they don’t acquire it in this screwy atmosphere by respiration.”

“That could be, of course. Meanwhile, let’s go down and investigate.”

Furtively, they sneaked to the threshold of the tower and peered in. A huge bare chamber gaped before them. It was lit by dim, pale fluorescence, and seemed to stretch up and eternally. The interior of the tower was hollow. But far above Quade caught the gleam of metal.

“Machine up there —”

He was interrupted by a cry from Strike.

“Gerry!”

The woman lay across the vast room, stretched unconscious on the floor.

Strike raced toward her, the others not far behind. He knelt beside the woman, examining her oxygen apparatus. Quickly he turned a valve.

Gerry’s face was flushed. Her lips were moving, and her eyes stared blankly, unseeingly. For a second, Strike imagined that the creatures of the comet had afflicted her with some weird disease. Then he recognized that this was merely delirium.

“Back to the ship,” Quade commanded. “Two of you carry her.”

“It’s too late,” Tommy Strike grunted. “Here come our little friends.”

Dozens of the blue spheres were rolling across the threshold into the huge room. More and more of them flooded in. Inexorably they bore down on the trapped Earthmen.

Strike gently lowered Gerry to the floor and whipped out his gun. The others had already drawn. But none fired till the hostile intentions of the intruders became unmistakable.

Then Quade’s explosive bullet blew one of the blue globes to fragments. A

staccato blast of gunfire instantly boomed and echoed through the cyanogen atmosphere within the tower, when his men followed his lead. A dozen of the enemy vanished, collapsing like split bladders. Curiously enough, some of them continued their disappearance, dematerializing like ghosts. Others remained.

But more of them appeared. Quade and his companions were forced back against the inner wall. They had plenty of ammunition, but it was impossible to withstand the irresistible tide of the globes.

“Where in hell are they coming from?” Strike yelled.

On they came, more and more of them, till the floor of the tower was covered with bluish balls, ranging in size from two to ten feet.

Quade switched on his audiophone and called Morgan, at the ship.

“What’s up, Chief?” Morgan asked, hearing the commotion.

“Come after us, quick,” the cameraman said quietly. In a few succinct sentences, he explained the situation, pausing at times to take pot-shots at the monsters.

“Can’t do it,” Morgan said. “One of the engines just went out. It’ll take hours to fix. We’ll come and get you on foot.”

“No,” Quade snapped. “Stay in the ship. Get that engine fixed. Those are definite orders.”

He had no time to say any more. Some of his men were already down, and the globes were rolling over them. Strike stood straddle-legged above Gerry’s unmoving form, a gun in either hand. The remnant of the men were clustered together. Backed helplessly against the wall, they were surrounded by the advancing hordes. Abruptly, unexpectedly, there came a breathing space.

The reason for it could not be discovered at first. Quade only realized that the attackers were failing to press their advantage. Previously, when one sphere had been destroyed, another sprang immediately into its place. But now the ranks were thinning, almost imperceptibly at first, but with steadily increasing speed. An alleyway opened toward the door, and Quade caught a glimpse of something entirely unexpected.

Through the door poured an army of red globes.

Red spheres and blue met in furious battle. The chamber was a seething, raging mass of bubbles, curiously lovely, tumbling and darting viciously in all directions. In dead silence, without visible weapons, the opposing groups pitted their strength against each other. And blue and red globes were deflated one by one.

“You were right,” Strike gasped, swaying on his feet. “Those two gangs are down on one another. Boy, is that lucky for us.”

“Yeah. If they’re not both down on us.”

There was enough time to take inventory. None of the men had been injured, save for minor contusions. The strong, flexible helmets had withstood all blows.

“No weapons,” Strike said. “They don’t use any, apparently. But they’re committing mayhem anyhow.”

Quade lifted his gun and then lowered it without firing.

“No visible weapons, Strike,” he amended. “Don’t forget, these creatures are utterly alien to us. Their weapons may be purely mental. They might kill by sheer thought-force.”

“Then why doesn’t it work on us?”

“Were not of the same species. We’re of entirely different chemical composition,” Quade pointed out. “Say, this fight looks like it’ll keep up forever. There’re more spheres now than when they started. They keep coming out of empty air.”

“I noticed that,” Strike grunted. “Hadn’t we better make a run for it?”

“I think so.”

The movie man issued orders. In a compact body, bearing Gerry’s body between them, the group moved forward, guns lifted. The spheres paid little attention until the Earthmen were almost at the door. Then the bizarre comet creatures realized that their prisoners were escaping. Blue monsters and red joined forces

to attack Quade and his companions.

This time results were somewhat different. Under the onslaught, most of the men went down, fighting gamely but uselessly. Quade was knocked flat beside Gerry. He twisted his head, trying to rise, saw the woman's eyes open and the light of consciousness spring into them. She recognized Quade.

Her lips moved, but her dead audiophone failed to respond. Nevertheless the movie man managed to read some of the words.

“Out of here ... quick... Save the others later. Only chance...”

There was still a gun in Gerry's hand. It blasted. The woman began to roll over and over. After a brief hesitation, Quade followed.

It wasn't easy. The thought of deserting his men was far from pleasant. But he realized that Gerry was seemingly deserting Strike, and he knew that she would never have done that without good reason. Moreover, two might escape where seven couldn't. Most of the globes were occupied with Strike and the other men.

By luck, skill and murderous aim, Gerry and Quade managed to reach the outskirts of the struggle. There they rose. Gerry gripped Quade's mittened hand and both ran frantically up the slope toward the nearest ridge.

Some of the spheres pursued. The next ten minutes were a chaos of gunfire and collapsing red and blue globes.

Chapter XXIII. The Seven Sleepers

When no more of the things appeared, Gerry sank down in the gravel, dragging Quade beside her.

“My audiophone,” her lips formed. “Can you fix it?”

Quade had an emergency repair kit with him. Hastily he repaired the device. It wasn't long before Gerry's voice came to him.

“Keep your eyes open,” she said breathlessly. “I don't know how much time we have, but it won't be long. We've only got the Proteans to contend with for awhile, but pretty soon all hell's going to break loose.”

“Proteans?”

“That’s what I call them. You’ll know why when I tell you what’s happened. Meanwhile, have your gun ready.”

Succinctly Gerry outlined what had happened to her up to the time of her capture. She went on: “Those creatures are intelligent. They communicate by pictures — thought-images — projected on their outer membrane. They communicated with me, all right. I found out plenty. Quade, what I’m going to tell you is going to seem unbelievable. Do you know how many Proteans there are?”

“A few thousand?” Tony hazarded.

“Seven,” Gerry said. “Seven Proteans, and that’s all. Seven sleepers!”

Quade wrinkled his brow. “I don’t —”

“They’re a decadent race. Ages ago they had an entirely different form, I don’t know just what. They’ve lived on this comet for unimaginable eons. They evolved along lines totally alien to ours, reached the summit of their culture, and began to slide back. This barren body won’t support much life. In time, only seven Proteans were left. They were highly evolved intellectuals, chained to this barren world because they hadn’t mastered space travel. Know what they did?”

A red sphere materialized twelve feet away. It rolled toward them, expanding as it moved. Quade blew it to fragments. The fragments dissolved into nothingness.

“They built the black tower,” Gerry went on. “It’s a machine, Quade, and what it does is something almost impossible. It materializes — dreams!”

The man didn’t laugh. “On first thought, it’s crazy,” he said thoughtfully.

“I know. But it’s a fact that all living tissue has a sort of electric halo, a field of energy. Isn’t that so?”

“Yeah. Why back in the nineteen-thirties, two chaps named Nims and Lane made a gadget sensitive enough to detect that field and record its patterns. But what has that got to do with a dream?”

“Dreams take electric energy, the same as conscious thought,” Gerry explained. “I figured it out, as well as I could, from what the Protean told me. Ever have a nightmare where you run and run but get nowhere? Ever wake up covered with perspiration, exhausted? That proves dreams take energy. Listen, if corporal life has a measurable electric field, it’s only a step further to record the energy patterns of a dream.”

For a few moments there was silence, while Quade digested the information.

“I’m getting the picture,” Quade said. “I think I follow you. If the energy pattern is recorded, why not change these patterns back into the electric waves that produced them, thus recreating the living issue, or the dream, that created them? The human voice was recorded in visible patterns long before Edison. But Edison’s phonograph retraced those visible patterns with a needle and made the sound come to life again.

“Sure,” he continued. “Even now images can be recorded as sound tracks. They sound like squeals and grunts, but an experienced movie engineer can identify them. I’ve done it myself. It’s not such a long step to playing them back as three-dimensional images.”

“More than images,” Gerry put in. “The tower does just that, without the intermediate step. Nothing is actually recorded. The towers just take the electric dream-pattern of the seven Proteans and recreate it, broadcast it, in the precise positions and motions that the dreamer wishes.”

“You mean all those spheres were dreams?” Quade asked. “Dreams that had acquired the attributes of matter?”

“Yes. They were real. Or, maybe, one-tenth real. Real enough to fight and die and communicate with me.”

“But why?” Quade asked. “Scientifically, it’s possible, though screwy as hell. But logically, there’s no reason for it.”

“It’s logical enough,” the woman declared, shifting her position uneasily on the hard gravel. “I told you there were seven bored intellectuals left on this comet. Blue and red — four of one, three of another. They couldn’t leave their world. They were faced with an unending monotony of existence. What would you have done?”

“Go crazy,” Quade admitted frankly.

“There was another way out. They had to create some interest in life. And they did. A deadly sort of chess game, three on one side, four on the other. It’s logical enough. Chess is an intellectual pastime, and this is super-scientific chess. Here’s what the Proteans did.

“They made this tower to materialize their dreams. They changed their shape, though I’m not quite sure about that. And they materialized their thought-patterns in the form of duplicates of themselves. Half of their brains are asleep and dreaming, while the other half is conscious, directing operations. We ourselves use only half of our brains, you know.”

Quade nodded curtly. “Right. But you actually mean there are only seven real Proteans on the comet?”

“That’s all. All the others are dream-images, plenty real enough though, because they’re given the energy and attributes of matter by the black tower. For centuries this murderous chess game has gone on. It might have gone on eternally, if we hadn’t introduced a new factor into the game.”

“Wait a minute,” Quade interrupted. Swiftly he told the woman of the bizarre creatures they had seen on the way to the tower — the Venusian whip, and the freak with Strike’s head.

“Sure.” Gerry smiled wryly. “I was delirious, feverish. And I was inside the tower. My proximity to the machine simply made my hallucinations materialize. And that’s the crux of the matter. The Proteans realized that I was valuable to them.”

When Gerry stated her value to the Dreamers, Quade fell silent. His tanned face was suddenly grim and worried as he realized the potential danger.

“Think of our memories,” Gerry whispered in horror. “The monsters we’ve seen on all the planets, the weapons we’ve used. The Proteans intended to put me asleep, control my brain, and induce me to dream of things I’d experienced. A Venusian whip. What a weapon that would be in the hands of the blues against the reds. We’re invaluable to them as fodder. Our brains are storehouses of dreams. And the Proteans can materialize dreams!”

“Lord, oh Lord,” Quade groaned. “What a mess. This is just about the damnedest thing I’ve ever run up against. How the devil can I photograph a dream? It just isn’t real.”

“It’s real enough to be filmed,” Gerry said. “And a Protean, a real Protean, not a dream — can be captured. But there’s another handicap. These things are above the minimum level of intelligence. By Interplanetary Law, no intelligent being can be taken from its home world against its consent.”

“Well, that can wait,” Quade said. “The main problem is to save Strike and my men. Wonder if the ship’s ready yet?”

He used the audiophone. Morgan responded worriedly. The engine wasn’t repaired but work to repair the ship was proceeding rapidly.

“We can’t stay here,” Tony said. “And we can’t go back to the tower. Let’s head for the ship.”

“We’d better hurry,” Gerry observed. “Once Tommy and the others are put to sleep, their dreams will start to come true. And Tommy has a vivid imagination.”

Quade arose painfully, assisted Gerry to her feet. The woman was still weak, but she pluckily shook off the man’s arm and started plodding forward.

“Keep your gun handy,” she advised.

The Proteans seemed to be lying low. But once the two caught sight of a whip lumbering over a rise to the left. It did not menace them, however, and soon went out of sight.

“The main problem,” Gerry mused, “is to awaken the seven sleeping Proteans. It’ll do no good to kill the others. New ones will materialize faster than we can shoot.”

“Where are the real ones?” Quade asked.

Gerry laughed bitterly. “Oh, they’re not tucked away in a private dormitory. That’s where the fun comes in. They’re mixed in with the others. They’re only half asleep, you know. Half of their brain is still conscious. And it’s utterly impossible to tell a real Protean from a fake one.”

“Can’t we simply keep shooting till we kill off all the real ones?”

“It’d be like cleaning up the Asteroid Belt with a bucket,” Gerry said in a hopeless voice. “We’ve got to identify the real ones and — well, I don’t want to kill them unless it’s necessary. They’d be no good to either of us dead. If we can awaken them —”

“We can’t wake ‘em up without identifying them,” Quade said. “And we can’t identify ‘em without waking them up. Lord.”

“Well, you can be sure this isn’t a real Protean,” Gerry said, as a shaggy, apelike figure lumbered over the rise toward them. “It’s a Hyclops! Where’s your rifle?”

The Hyclops, native to Ganymede, stands more than twelve feet high, is terrifyingly covered with hair, and has four arms. Its three one-eyed heads bear murderous fangs that protrude from a slobbering, loose-lipped mouth. “Get the eyes,” Gerry yelled, scurrying to one side. “We haven’t any super-explosive bullets, but — aim at the eyes.”

“You’re telling me,” Quade grunted, dashing in the other direction. He whirled, crouched on one knee, pumped bullets at the monster. The Hyclops charged on, foam frothing from its slavering mouth. The huge, shaggy arms clawed at the air.

One bullet found its mark. The right head lost its eye and lolled uselessly on the fatty neck. The creature let out a soundless bellow of agony and whirled toward Quade. If this was a dream, the man thought, it was certainly one hell of a nightmare!

Quade scampered away. He caught a flashing glimpse of the monster towering above him, huge as a colossus, the mighty arms clutching. Quade dived between the pillarlike legs, shuddering at what might happen if a taloned hand closed on his space suit. In that cyanogen atmosphere, he’d die almost before the Hyclops crushed him.

Gerry’s bullet found the center head. The huge monster shrieked silently and jerked erect. The remaining head lifted. Gerry fired again.

The Hyclops collapsed. Like a bag of deflated skin, it slumped down and fell on Quade. The man had only time for one frantic thought of impending destruction before he was smashed flat. He tried to roll aside —

And the Hyclops vanished. It disappeared into thin air. It was gone like the figment of a dream that it was.

“This is doing me no good,” Quade said, rising unsteadily to his feet. “Suppose I’d wanted that head — or those heads, I mean — for my mantelpiece.”

Gerry laughed somewhat bitterly. “Imagine how a real big-game hunter feels. Come on. Let’s hurry, before Tommy uses his imagination again.”

A new phase entered the situation. Mirages seemed to dance indistinctly all about them. Vague, half-seen images flickered in the distance and were gone — flashing pictures of alien worlds Tommy Strike had once seen — bizarre monsters, strange faces, some that were recognizable.

On they went, under the strange white sky of the comet. The seething, colossal tides of flame roared and swept above them. It was weird beyond all imagination. The two might have imagined themselves the last humans in the Universe, tracking a barren waste beneath the cosmic fires of creation.

Once they saw, or thought they saw, Gerry herself running rapidly but getting nowhere. This, too, dissolved.

“If I meet myself,” Gerry said unhappily, “I’ll go crazy. How much farther is it?”

“Not far,” Quade comforted. “What’s this, now?”

Apparently Tommy Strike had once more had delirium tremens. At least, the monster approaching looked like nothing that ever existed anywhere. It was a sea-serpent, twenty feet long, writhing rapidly toward them with vast jaws agape. But luckily it disappeared before guns could be drawn.

Quade and Gerry reached the ship without further mishap. Morgan greeted them, helping them off with the bulky suits.

“That engine’s still giving trouble,” he observed. “We strained it badly, getting through the coma. And another motor’s in need of overhauling.”

“Has to be done,” Quade said grimly. “We want to get off the comet alive. I need a drink.”

He took Gerry to the control cabin. For some time they pondered, between pouring and drinking. But they did succeed in calming their battered minds to coherence.

“We can’t move the ship,” Quade said at length. “That’s certain. Will any of those traps and snares of yours work on the Proteans?”

“You can’t hypnotize a sleeping person,” the woman said. “So the hypnotic lure wouldn’t work. That’s the toughest part of it. My traps are designed for living monsters, not dreams and dreamers. The heavy-range guns might work, but we can’t drag them all the way to the tower. Also” — she glanced at a chronometer — “time’s getting short. We’re nearing the Sun. This comet is traveling plenty fast.”

Quade lit a cigar of greenish, aromatic Lunar tobacco.

“Let’s think. We’ve got to figure out a way of waking the seven sleepers so their phantom legions will vanish. Um-m. What is sleep, anyway?”

“There’s more than one theory. The brain varies between the states of excitation and relaxation. The greater the excitation, the sooner comes relaxation, or sleep. The seven Proteans are half awake and half asleep. Super-development of the brain causes that.”

Quade nodded. “If we could irritate them enough to cause waking — Let’s see. These creatures are highly evolved. Their outer membranes are composed of specialized cells. That means their nerve-endings must be extremely sensitive. And they live in a cyanogen atmosphere.”

“Cyanogen,” Gerry said, drawing a comb through tangled red hair. “If we could release a gas or a liquid chemical spray to change the cyanogen into something irritating, something that would wake up the sleepers —”

“We can’t use the ship,” Quade pointed out. “It would have to be portable. Um-m.” He reached for a pad and pencil and made hasty notations.

“(CN)₂ Plus O₂ yields nitrogen and carbon dioxide,” the formula read. He showed it to Gerry.

“The Proteans are used to a cyanogen atmosphere. The carbon dioxide would be

poisonous or suffocating to them. Maybe. It'd destroy all life on the comet, except us."

Gerry started convulsively. She snatched up the pad and figured quickly.

"Hold on. I think I've got it. Ammonium oxalate. Yeah. Look at this."

She showed Quade her notation. It read: "(CN)₂ Plus H₂O yields ammonium oxalate."

"Water?" Quade asked.

"Cyanogen plus water in the form of a simple spray would form ammonium oxalate. That salt isn't cyanide and would be a tremendous irritant to creatures living in cyanogen and its compounds. And the effect would be local. That's the answer. We've got it!"

Quade nodded slowly. "I think you're right. Sure! We'll use portable tanks and sprayers. I'll get Morgan."

He did so, and issued hasty instructions.

There was instant, orderly confusion. Portable tanks had to be filled. Hoses and spray-nozzles had to be prepared. But at last a skeleton crew of men was ready, Gerry and Quade at their head. A few were left to work on the engines, Morgan among them.

"We'll be back as soon as we can," Quade said. "In the meantime, my orders still stand. If we're not back before the deadline, take off without us."

Morgan shook his shaggy head.

"We're getting awful close to the Sun, Chief."

"I know," Quade shrugged. "I'm taking a few cameras with me, but I can't load up on bulky stuff. It'd slow us down too much. It looks like we'll get precious little for Von Zorn. And you won't get any monsters, either," he added to Gerry. She didn't say anything.

They set out at a furious, but more hopeful pace.

“We’ll wear a trail to the tower pretty soon,” Gerry said bitterly.

“Uh-huh. I wonder if that will work?” Quade pondered. “Plain water doesn’t sound like much of a weapon.”

Ten minutes later his words seemed justified. A creature like a gigantic spider, six feet high and a dozen in diameter, rushed down a slope toward them. Its mandibles clicked viciously.

“The tanks,” Gerry cried shrilly. “Try the water.”

“Use your guns,” Quade’s deeper voice drowned her out. “Fire, everybody.”

Pistols crashed loudly. At once the great spider was killed. But its body still raced forward, bowling over one man before it collapsed. Though its eyes had been smashed and it was blind, the mandibles still snapped in insensate fury, until it vanished from sight.

“There was no time for anything but bullets then,” Quade explained. “But it looks like your chance is right here. There comes a blue globe.”

One of the blue Proteans, only five feet in diameter, was rolling unsuspectingly toward them. On its surface-membrane a picture appeared — a picture of the spider that had just been killed.

Nobody said anything. The Protean hesitated, grew larger, and began to roll purposefully toward the group.

“Now.” Gerry said.

Quade pointed the nozzle of his tank-tube. He turned a valve. The nozzle hissed shrilly. They stared hopefully, expectantly.

Chapter XXIV. “Forget the Guns!”

It began to snow. Ammonium oxalate was precipitated out of the cyanogen atmosphere. It drifted down on the Protean, who did not seem discouraged in the least degree.

“Doesn’t work,” Quade groaned, and used his gun.

The blue monster deflated. But several more appeared. Again Quade tried the watertank, with equal failure. Bullets finally slew the comet creatures.

“Well,” Gerry said, as the last of them disappeared. “I don’t know. Either I’m completely wrong, or else ammonium oxalate affects only real Proteans, not the dream-images. In that case we’ve got to find the real sleepers.”

“All right,” Quade acceded. “We’ll keep on toward the tower. We’d better not use the tanks again till we’re absolutely ready. The sleepers may not have been warned, so we don’t want to show our hand too soon. If your idea’s right, we’ll be okay. If it’s wrong, we’re eclipsed.”

Gerry said nothing, though she realized the truth of Quade’s assertion. Doggedly the little group plodded on through the gray, gravelly soil. Several times they caught sight of additional Proteans. Once they viewed a Hyclops, in the distance, pursuing a group of fleeing red spheres.

“Looks like the blue Proteans have captured Tommy,” Gerry remarked. “They’re using his dream-visions in their crazy chess game. Wonder what happened to the other men?”

Quade was wondering, too, and it wasn’t a pleasant thought.

Gerry’s thoughts were equally distressful. Tommy Strike was in serious trouble. She felt that her own rashness had been responsible for his present predicament. She kept seeing his face —

Abruptly, she muttered something suspiciously like an oath and took deadly aim at a Protean that had materialized nearby. It exploded into tatters. She felt slightly better.

Overhead the fires of the comet’s coma seethed and churned. Beyond that white veil the Solar System moved in its accustomed orbits. Work was proceeding on the Ark. People were wandering through the London Zoo, gazing at Gerry’s exhibits. Hollywood on the Moon was, as usual, buzzing with excitement. Everywhere television sets were discussing the comet, and the possible fate of the explorers who had vanished into its fires.

Not far away were all these friendly, familiar things — shut out by an impalpable wall of alien matter. Light-years away. Gerry, Quade, and the others were

imprisoned on the comet, while the galactic wanderer rushed on toward the disastrous proximity of the Sun. And slowly, slowly, the time of grace shortened.

From the start, things had gone wrong. Perhaps, Gerry thought, it was her fault. But, then, nobody could have foreseen conditions on the comet. It was too far outside the ken of Earthmen. Gerry felt a touch of awe as she looked up at the weird sky, a realization of the vast, cosmic immensities that surround our Solar System. So much lay outside. So much was unknown, could never be understood by human minds!

She shrugged and plodded on. It didn't matter. The business of the day was something entirely different. This was more familiar, dealing with weapons, pitting the skill and intelligence of Catch-'emAlive Carlyle against her enemies.

Quade's thoughts were rather similar. His keen brain was working, discarding possibilities, advancing theories, planning, plotting.

When they came in sight of the black tower, the minds of all the group were attuned to highest intensity.

Quade stopped.

"We don't know the full power or capabilities of the Proteans," he said quietly. "So watch yourselves. They may have purely mental weapons. Keep alert, and in touch with me. The minute anything seems to be going wrong, let me know."

They went down toward the monolith. It wasn't deserted now. Its base was hidden by thousands of the spheres, red and blue, united against a common foe. The Proteans waited, silent, alert, menacing...

The tension increased almost to the breaking point. Step by step, crunching their heavy space boots through the gravel, the party advanced. The enemy made no move. Silently they waited at the base of the ebon monolith, under the white, churning skies of flame.

Silence... Ominous, torturing silence.

Quade's nerves were taut. He could feel the thrill of impending danger flooding through him, tugging at his mind, crying the nearness of peril. His hands swung loosely at his sides, never too far from the gun-butts. The rifle slung across his

shoulder slapped his hips at each step. Gerry walked cautiously beside him. After them came the men, bizarre figures with the big watertank cylinders jutting above their helmeted heads.

The nearest of the spheres was forty feet away. Thirty. Twenty-five...

The slope was not so steep now. Crunch, crunch went the metal boots. Hoarse breathing whistled through the audiophones.

“Chief,” somebody whispered.

“Steady,” Quade said. “Steady, fellas!”

Twenty feet separated the group from the Proteans. Fifteen... Ten...

The interplanetary huntress and Quade strode confidently toward the massed ranks. He walked into a gap between two of the monsters. And they gave way.

Hesitation would have been fatal. Gerry and Quade kept on, and a path was cleared for him as he moved. One by one, two by two, the Proteans shrank away.

In his track came Gerry and the others. The tension was unendurable.

“Chief,” a voice said, “they’re closing up behind us.”

“Let ‘em,” Quade snapped, and kept going.

The wall of the tower loomed just ahead. Gerry and Quade stepped over the threshold, stood for a second in the queer pale illumination streaming from within. The floor was carpeted with Proteans, some tiny, others six feet and more in diameter. Gerry could not see Tommy Strike or the others.

Another path of Proteans opened across the floor of the tower chamber. Through that Gerry and Quade advanced, in grim, deadly silence.

Forward they went, till they reached the center. There they paused.

At their feet lay five motionless figures, Earthmen all, unconscious and silent in their space suits and helmets. In a single glance, Gerry saw that they breathed. But the strange spell of dream held them fettered.

“Tommy!”

Gerry sprang forward, knelt beside Strike. She put her palms flat on the transparent helmet, as though she could feel through it the flushed face of the man.

As though, at a signal, the Proteans roused into activity. A stir of concerted movement rippled through the chamber. The spheres swayed, rocked. Suddenly they poured down on the Earthmen.

Quade’s gun snarled without hesitation. The men fired a single, continuous roar of bullets.

But from the start it was hopeless. Like the fabled legions of Cadmus, the Proteans seemed to spring into existence from empty air. Strange dream-beings, given the attributes of matter and energy by the power of the black monolith. Dreams made real-living, dangerous, roused now to furious activity.

Quade saw two of his men go down under the onslaught. He blew a blue monster to fragments, shattered a red one. Then he also fell under the attack of a giant. It rolled completely over him and was gone. It had vanished.

White flakes drifted down against Quade’s helmet.

He sprang up, somewhat dazed by his fall. He stared around.

The dream-legions had unaccountably thinned. At least half of them had vanished. But more were approaching, materializing from the air.

Standing above Strike’s body, Gerry Carlyle was using her tank-and-hose. H₂O — plain, ordinary water — spurted high in the cyanogen atmosphere, and the precipitated ammonium oxalate fell like snowflakes.

“Use your tanks!” Gerry shrilled. “Forget the guns.”

Quade set the example. He twisted a valve, sent a fine spray of water shooting up. Immediately the others did the same. The salt had no effect on most of the Proteans.

But suddenly, without warning, a number of them snuffed out and were gone.

Then a few hundred more disappeared.

“They’re waking up,” Gerry cried. “The seven sleepers —”

Seven sleeping Proteans, securely hidden among their materialized dreams, each identical with the originals. Now awakening came to them, one by one. Sensitive nerve-endings reacted to the irritant salt. No real Protean could remain in dreaming sleep under the circumstances. And whenever a real Protean awoke, his dreams vanished.

The hordes thinned. They were reduced quickly by leaps and bounds. Five hundred — two hundred — a few dozen —

Finally, seven spheres, four blue and three red, lay within the tower. Quivering slightly, they shuddered under the attack of the irritant salt and began to roll toward the doorway.

Quade blocked their path, lifting his sprayer threateningly.

The Proteans hesitated, not knowing what to do.

“Turn off the water,” Gerry commanded. “They won’t go to sleep again. I’ll try to communicate with them. I’ve learned how.”

She turned the valve of her tank and advanced toward the nearest blue Protean. It waited helplessly. The five-foot sphere looked like nothing so much as a gigantic Christmas tree ornament, Quade thought absently.

Gerry wasn’t saying anything, but the sphere was agitated. Pictures appeared on its surface membrane.

The woman turned to Quade.

“They’re telepaths, you know. They can read strongly projected thoughts. And I can piece out what they mean, more or less, from the pictures they make.”

There was another period of silence, while the strange, three-dimensional, color images flickered over the globe’s bluish skin.

“It’s all set,” Gerry remarked at length. “Tommy and the others haven’t been

hurt. They'll wake up by themselves pretty soon. Feed 'em caffeine and brandy and they'll be ready to go."

"They're harmless now?" Quade said.

"Yes. As long as we don't squirt water on them, they'll play ball with us. The ammonium oxalate is complete torture to the Proteans."

The movie man was glancing at his chronometer. He audiophoned the ship, and conversed briefly with Morgan. Then he turned back to Gerry.

"Yeah," he said bleakly. "It's nearly deadline. By putting all the men to work muy pronto we may get the engines repaired in time to pull free of the comet. But as for shooting any pictures, I can't spare a man. Well, I'll shoot what background I can on the way back to the ship."

Gerry was communicating again with the Proteans.

"The Sun's proximity won't hurt these beasties," she said. "Apparently they can resist electric energy much better than we can." Her voice turned wistful. "Maybe we could come back to the comet after it rounds the Sun."

"Nope." Quade shook his head hopelessly. "No ship. Your Ark won't be ready till too late, and there's no other vessel. After we get through the coma again and pull away from the Sun — if we do — this boat of ours will need complete overhauling. When we leave Almussen's Comet, it means good-bye."

He pondered.

"Unless we can take some of the Proteans with us," he added at length. "Find out, will you?"

The woman conversed silently. Then she shook her head.

"They won't leave home. Although, I'll tell you what. Go back and get to work on the ship. Take Tommy and the others with you. Pick me up here when you take off, and I may be able to convince some of the Proteans in the meantime."

"Better get more than one," Quade said, "or you'll lose out."

The woman's eyes narrowed.

"I'll attend to that," she observed. "Scram."

But Quade still hesitated to leave.

"Sure you'll be safe?"

Gerry patted her water tank

"Plenty safe. My audiophone's working, anyway. But I guess you'd better leave Tommy Strike here with me."

Bearing their unconscious burdens, Quade and his men set out on the return journey. Luckily the gravity of the comet was so small that they were able to negotiate the trip without too much delay.

Once aboard the ship, every man pitched in and sweated and toiled over the motors. Even those who had been put to sleep were revived without trouble, and they also contributed their efforts. Yet Quade watched his chronometer worriedly.

It seemed hours before the final tests were completed. The reliability of the ship was still uncertain, but there was no time to waste. The deadline was already past.

Quade worked hurriedly at the controls. The craft lifted waveringly, and slid along thirty feet above the uneven surface.

Soon they sighted the tower. Quade landed beside it. From the monolith emerged Gerry, Strike, and two blue Proteans. The woman called Quade on the audiophone.

"Two of them will go with us. One for you, one for me. Let me in the ship, will you?"

"Swell," Quade replied, pressing a lever that opened the airlock nearest Gerry. "Hop aboard."

She and Strike complied. In the ship, they removed their helmets and rushed to

the control room.

“Open the lock again,” Gerry gasped. “Get cyanogen into it. The Proteans can’t live in oxygen, so we’ll have to keep ‘em in the lock till we can fix up an airtight room for them.”

“Check.”

Quade opened the lock, and the two Proteans hastily rolled into it. The valve shut after them.

Gerry had already scurried off to prepare a home for her cometary guests. Strike remained with Quade, mopping his brow.

“What an experience. Worse than going under ether, Tony. I’ve got the worst headache.”

He fumbled in a closet for a pain-killer.

“You’ll have a worse headache if luck isn’t with us,” Quade said grimly. “The deadline’s past, Strike. I’m going to take the biggest chance I’ve ever taken in my life.”

The other man turned.

“Eh?” he asked bewilderedly

Quade sent the ship arrowing up.

“We’re a lot nearer the Sun than we should be. But this boat’s too strained to stand up long in the electronic bombardment of the coma. We can’t stay in it as long as we did before. Our only chance is to accelerate like hell and go straight through the thinnest part.”

Strike’s jaw dropped considerably.

“The thinnest part. You mean —”

“Yeah. The tail of a comet always points away from the Sun. The Sun’s energy pushes at the comet’s coma and tail. That means the thinnest section of the coma

is directly opposite the tail on the side facing the Sun.”

“Jumping Jupiter,” said Tommy Strike weakly. “We break through at top speed, headed for the Sun. And we’re inside Mercury’s orbit?”

“Way inside. Tell your side-kick to get the Proteans out of the lock in a hurry or they’ll be fried alive. Unless they can resist plenty of energy.”

Strike departed in a frantic rush.

Quade crouched over the controls, his lean face grim and expressionless, a cold fire in his eyes. He was taking a long chance. But it was the only one. To remain on the comet an hour or two longer would mean certain destruction.

He jammed on more acceleration. The ship streaked up like a thunderbolt, heading for the turgidly flaming skies. Faster — faster —

He called Morgan, spoke briefly over his shoulder.

“Strap me in. Bandage me. I’m accelerating plenty.”

The other man obeyed.

Quade, looking more like a mummy than a human being, snapped another order.

“Take care of the men. Ready them for acceleration.”

Morgan nodded silently and went out.

Already the space devils were tearing at the ship. The struts groaned and shrilled under the terrific strain. But this was only the beginning, Quade knew. The real test would come later.

White fires loomed ahead. The coma! Quade jammed on more power, felt sickness tug at his stomach, felt his eyes press out of shape as the muscles strained to focus the delicate mechanism of vision.

And now they were in the coma.

Faster, faster! Added to the tremendous speed was the electronic bombardment that ripped at the fabric of the already weakened vessel. Once more the metal of

the ship began to glow faintly. Again the craft yelled in shrill metallic protest.

The visiplate was a hell of raving white fire. It cleared without warning. In place of the curdled flames was a round, blazing disk. The Sun —

And the space ship was driving toward it at top acceleration.

Quade took a deep breath. Closing his eyes, he touched three buttons in rapid succession. Immediately he was flung sideward, as though by a giant's hand. Glass shattered throughout the ship. Light metal bent like putty. Men screamed in agony as ribs and small bones cracked. Everyone was strapped into safety compartments, well padded, but those puny devices were far from enough.

The ship curved. At top speed it swerved away from the Sun. Quade had not dared decelerate, for the mighty mass of the Sun could overcome any number of gravity-screens at this small distance. The outer hull glowed flaming red. The straining motors hummed, rattled, hissed under the overload.

A pointer on a gauge before Quade hovered on a red line, went past it, hesitated, and crept slowly back. He breathed again. Gasping, he began to decelerate.

It was over. They were safe. They had fought against comet and Sun.

And they had won the fight!

Chapter XXV. Double DoubleCross

Exactly one month later, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike were sitting in the woman's private office in the London Zoo, sipping cocktails and reading rave press notices.

"What a draw," Strike chortled. "Our blue Protean is drawing customers like flypaper."

"Uh-huh," the woman said happily. "And that isn't the best of it, either, I'm just waiting for a televisor call."

Strike put down a clipping.

"You've been gloating over this secret of yours for a month. What the devil is

it?”

Gerry’s answer was cut short as the televisor buzzed. She sprang up and answered it. On the screen appeared the simian, contorted face of Von Zorn.

“You chiseler,” he yelled. “You doublecrossing so-and-so. I’ll sue you from here to Pluto.”

Tommy Strike got in front of the screen.

“Listen, drizzlepuss, you’re talking to a lady.”

Von Zorn turned a brilliant green. “Ha, a lady! Would a lady palm off a dream on me? A Protean? What a laugh. For a month it acted all right. And now, right when I was making a speech at the Rotary Club with the thing on the table beside me — it vanishes. Just like that!”

Strike turned to see that Gerry was helpless with laughter. Feebly she reached up and turned off the televisor.

“You palmed off one of the fake Proteans on Von Zorn,” Tommy accused.

“I told you they couldn’t play me for a sucker,” Gerry gasped, and exploded into a fresh outburst of merriment. “It’s turn and turn about. They tricked me into giving ‘em publicity. So I just turned the tables.”

The televisor buzzed again. This time Strike turned it on. But it wasn’t Von Zorn. It was, instead, Tony Quade, and he was looking surprisingly happy.

“Hello,” he greeted cordially, removing a battered pipe from his firm mouth. “Everybody cheerful, I see. That’s nice.”

Gerry sobered suddenly. “Well?”

“Oh, nothing much. Von Zorn told you our little pet vanished, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“I just wanted to get it straight. You arranged with one of the Proteans to create a dream-duplicate, and for me to get the duplicate. And you fixed it up so my

Proteans would disappear after a time. That right?”

“That,” said Gerry, “is right. And I’m not apologizing.”

“Oh, don’t apologize,” Quade said urbanely. “Everything’s just fine. I wanted to show you this.”

He lifted a three-sheet placard which read:

NINE PLANETS PRESENTS

CALL OF THE COMET

Produced and Directed by

Anthony Quade

Starring

The Proteans

and

Gerry Carlyle

The woman gasped inarticulately. “It’s a fake,” she cried at last. “You only shot a few backgrounds on the comet.”

“Yeah,” Quade acknowledged. “But I managed to get acquainted with my dream Protean. He was as intelligent as his original, you know. He told me he was a fake, that he’d vanish after awhile. So I knew what to expect, and I took precautions.”

“It’s still a fake,” Gerry said stubbornly.

“Think so? Remember how the Proteans communicate? By projecting colored, three-dimensional images on their skins. Those pictures can be photographed, Miss Carlyle.

“I got my Protean to think and project a complete photoplay — starring you — and we shot and transcribed it directly from Protean’s membranous skin. I photographed a photoplay. I told you the creatures were intelligent.

“It’s a perfect reproduction,” Quade went on. “Nobody could tell it from the real thing. I’ve got the history of the Proteans, our arrival, your capture — everything that happened.”

“It’s illegal to pretend I’m in the picture,” Gerry snapped furiously. “I know that,

at any rate.”

“You signed a contract in Von Zorn’s office,” Quade pointed out. “We’ve a perfect right to bill you as star of this picture.” He grinned. “It’ll be swell publicity for you, lady. And you don’t deserve it.”

Gerry breathed deeply. But the training of years stood her in good stead.

“At least, I’ve got the only Protean in existence in this System,” she merely remarked. “That’s something you can’t swipe.”

Quade chuckled maliciously.

“Yeah? How do you tell a real Protean from a dream one? The dream one vanishes. Yours hasn’t vanished yet, has he?”

Gerry struck angrily at the televisor, shutting it off. She barked into an audiophone: “Peters! Peters! Is my Protean still there?”

“Sure,” came an unseen voice. “Why shouldn’t he be? He’s rolling around in his tank of cyanogen, happy as a lark.”

Don’t worry,” Strike said, putting a capable arm around Gerry. “He’s real enough.”

The woman emitted a small groan.

“But is he? There’s only one way of telling. If he vanishes, he’s a fake.”

“Well,” said Tommy Strike, after thoroughly kissing his fiancée, “at least there’s no danger of my vanishing. After all, what’s a Protean or two?”

The words were unfortunate. Gerry seemed to regain her usual spirits. Her voice crackled like an electronic bombardment.

“Yes, indeed,” she remarked coldly. “Just who were you dreaming about on that comet?”

Strike released the woman and headed for the door.

“See you later, honey,” he said over his shoulder. “I’m off to Mars. I hear the

mariloca are running ...”

For some reason, “Catch-‘emAlive” Gerry Carlyle scampered frantically after him.