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PERCY THE PIRATE

By
HENRY KUTTNER

First published in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*,
Summer, 1945.

*Jerry Morse's biggest Futurefilm publicity stunt backfires when an imitation space
Pirate turns out to be the real thing!*

There were two reasons why I said "Yipe!" when Percy Ketch came into my office at Solar Films. First, the big, black-bearded so-and-so had been the most notorious space pirate in the System. Second, Percy Ketch had been dead for almost a year, after his famous ship, *Raider*, had been blasted down on Ceres.

Then I remembered. For a couple of weeks I'd been so busy finagling publicity on that super-special, *Murder on Mars*, that I'd forgotten *Black Rover*, our projected space thriller based on the exploits of Ketch. I should have remembered, though.

Barnaby, the director, had driven me nearly nuts screaming for publicity. He was a grand movie man, in the old tradition. No matter how much the critics kicked, Barnaby's pics grossed big. Why not?

There was that time he imported a man-eating *gryll* from Venus—which got loose on the set and had to be blasted with a ray-cannon. There was the asteroid Barnaby built to film a sequence in *Thundering Moons*.

I'd told Barnaby, over and over again, that I didn't want to do publicity for his stuff—I like to work up my own nervous breakdowns. But no, the Great Barnaby had the bug that I had the same sort of vibrations he had in his own aura—which made me the goat.

So I put aside my doodling and grinned at the guy who looked like Percy Ketch.

"Nice," I said. "Very nice. In fact, a sweet make-up job."

Rupert Kerrigan clawed at his beard.

"Look at this alfalfa, Jerry. Did you ever see whiskers like this on a human face before?"

"Sure. Percy Ketch's, in the newspics."

"Bah!" Kerrigan said, beginning to act like a ham, as usual. "He made me *grow* them!"

"Well," I said, "that'll prove you're old enough to shave, anyhow."

He sat down and lit a blue Martian cigaro.

"What about my public? Women come to shows to see my face, not the Black Forest. I'm a romantic type, Jerry."

"So was Ketch."

"A pirate!"

"In the grand tradition. Captain Kidd, Morgan, and the buccaneers of the Spanish Main. He glamourized space piracy. Look at his *Raider*. A specially built job. If six patrol boats hadn't found him by accident on Ceres, he'd be alive now."

"The *Raider* wasn't so fast."

"It didn't need to be. In space, it was invisible—dead-black special steel alloy. You can't see a black ship unless it occludes stars."

Kerrigan had been chewing his beard. A fat, round-faced man with a gleaming bald head and horn-rimmed spectacles bounced into my office and screamed at him shrilly.

“Stop it!” Rex Barnaby yelled, waving his arms. “I trained that beard hair by hair! We start shooting in two days on Ceres!”

“Two days, eh?” I said hastily. “I’d better get busy on releases.”

“I got an idea on that.” Barnaby’s pink face twisted into a leer. “You’re the one to put it over, too. Rupert, you get out of here. I wish to make words with Jerry.”

“How can I kiss Mona with this hay on my jaw?” Kerrigan demanded. “My fans are going to laugh their heads off.”

“Your fans have got nothing in their heads or they wouldn’t be your fans. You’ve been typed too long, Rupert. Playing Percy Ketch is going to get you an Oscar, wait and see.”

Kerrigan went out, looking as though he’d sell his soul for a razor. Barnaby beamed after him.

“I give him a new career, for free, and he kicks. I could make a picture with a bluepoint oyster as the hero and it’d play SRO at the Center Theatre. All the same, I got trouble. Your publicity has flopped.”

I looked at him, waiting. He evaded my eyes.

“I wanted a complete replica of Ketch’s ship—complete to the last detail. The public would have eaten that up.”

“You know who turned thumbs down on that,” I said. “The big boss himself. Eighty grand to build a *Raider*—he said no, and I don’t blame him.”

Barnaby searched for hairs to pull.

“But I must have authenticity, Jerry. I got to, or I don’t feel the picture.”

“You got it. You salvaged the real *Raider* and rebuilt it.”

Barnaby leaned closer.

“I slipped one over. That rebuilding job—I used real stuff. The big boss doesn’t know it yet.”

“Wait’ll he finds out,” I said sadly.

“That’s why I need you, Jerry. The *Raider* was a wreck after the patrol boats left it on Ceres. We had it towed to Earth, and rebuilt.

“Well, that job was accurate, down to the last detail. Right now the *Raider* is exactly as it was when Percy Ketch commanded it.”

“Oh, Lord!” I groaned. “You didn’t load the ray-guns?”

“That’s the only trouble. I couldn’t get ray-charges. Government control, you know. We’re due to take the *Raider* to Ceres. Shooting starts when we arrive, in two days. Only we need a big publicity stunt—a cosmic one, Jerry.”

“Steal some ray-charges and blast down a patrol ship,” I suggested.

“Lay off the funny stuff. Here’s my idea. Suppose Percy Ketch didn’t die on Ceres?”

“He did.”

“Sure, but suppose he’s still alive. He finds out we’ve rebuilt the *Raider*, smuggles himself aboard, and takes over.”

“He takes over alone?”

“Some of his old crew are with him. Then we signal for help, a patrol boat comes along and the fake Ketch makes a getaway, with his gang, in a lifeboat. Details can be worked out later.”

“Uh-huh. Like the question of how a patrol ship can locate the *Raider*. It’s black, remember.”

“The star—Kerrigan—barricades himself in the radio room and sends out a tight beam to guide the patrol in. A child could do it.”

“Why not?” I thought. “A child planned it.” But I didn’t say a word. After all, Barnaby’s my boss.

“So,” he said, “you con the extra files and find somebody who looks like Percy Ketch. Take over, Jerry. I trust you implicitly.”

I sat there, looking after him as he bounced out.

Then I went through the files. Finally I found somebody who resembled the dead pirate, and gave him a call, as well as a half dozen other boys I knew I could handle. After that I made a date with Mona Irish for dinner.

Mona was Kerrigan’s leading lady in Black Rover. Her pug nose and red curls showed on the visiplat a half hour later.

“Jerry,” she said, “I’ve got to break our date. I’m sorry.”

“So am I,” I said. “What makes?”

“Barnaby says I’ve got to dine with Rupert.”

“Rupe the droop?” I remarked, rather nastily. “Give him the brush-off.”

“I can’t. You know Barnaby.”

“Yeah,” I said, and broke the beam. The door was buzzing.

It was the chap who looked like Percy Ketch. The resemblance wasn’t too striking. He wasn’t bearded, which made a lot of difference. His name was Underwood.

“You get the angle,” I said finally. “You take over when we’re a day out. Give Kerrigan a chance to lock himself in the radio room. When I tip you off, take to the lifeboats and head for Planetoid X-One Hundred Eighty-seven-V. I’ll have a ship there to pick you up and bring you back here.”

“I get it.”

The others were outside now, so I had them in and repeated the story. I warned them not to talk. They knew better than to spill a yarn like this.

After that I arranged for the pick-up ship, went out for dinner at the Jupiter Dome and glared across the room at Kerrigan with Mona. I returned to the office, got bored, went down to the labs and played with litmus and isotopes till I was called.

The blast-off was at dawn. Barnaby inquired in a furtive voice if I’d attended to everything. When I said I had, he remarked that, after all, he’d done all the brain work. I gave him a long, sizzling glare and went off to bed.

At sun-up I reached the spaceport. The *Raider* lay on the seared tarmac, looking remarkably unlike other spaceships. The pirate’s ship was oval rather than a slim ellipse, built and braced for strength and invulnerability.

In her halcyon days, she could take blasts and return them, and, with her dead-black, perfectly smooth hull, could slip away and vanish at a moment’s notice.

At present she looked like a fat old dowager. She was in perfect condition. There were no ports. Tiny “eyes” were connected to vision screens within the ship.

Cameras were grinding all over the place. Rex Barnaby, his billiard-ball head gleaming, was bouncing madly about, shouting orders. I looked at my watch, yelled at him and headed for the entrance-port.

In the control cabin Mona was kissing Kerrigan. There weren't any cameras around.

"You're doing all right, Rupert," I said, "in spite of the beard."

They jerked apart, and Mona started to say something, but I'd had enough. I went to my own cabin, dug out a bottle of high-powered Scotch, and started in. Pretty soon I wasn't minding so much.

A few centuries later Barnaby stuck his nose in, glared at me, and asked what I was doing.

"Three guesses," I said. "Have a drink?"

"Look, Jerry. Mona told me—"

"I know. She loves me. It was madness, sheer madness of the moment. So what?"

"Now, Jerry. We can't have this. We've got work to do."

"It's all done," I said. "You don't need me."

"I hate to see a man lose his head over a woman."

"I just like to get drunk," I said. "Mona hasn't anything to do with it."

"You're crazy about her, Jerry—"

"*You're* crazy," I said, which seemed to hurt his feelings. He went out. I found another bottle and wondered what chance a publicity man has against a big-shot star? Some time later I went to sleep.

Finally I awoke hungry and rang for food. The coffee had a curious taste. I didn't recognize it until too late. Drugged to the eyes with nembutyl, I passed out.

I woke up with a mild headache and a sense of something wrong. Briefly I lay motionless. I kept hearing distant shouts, and the *clap-clapping* of ray-guns.

The wall-calender showed I'd been under the drug for two days and a night. We should be nearing our destination, close to the Asteroid Belt.

Clap-clap went a ray-gun, in the corridor outside. I got up, found the door locked. But the lock was flimsy.

Outside, a man with a gun was shooting at the feet of another, but driving him back.

"Hey!" I said.

"You, too," the gunman told me. "Get along with him, fast."

He blasted toward my feet, and I hit him on the point of the jaw. He went back and over, knocked cold. I snatched up his gun, still feeling dazed.

"Hell's busted loose," the other guy remarked. "That was one of his men. Ketch—he's aboard!"

"Come on," I said, starting toward the control rooms, where most of the noise was coming from. The spaceman followed. At a turn in the passage I was in time to see Rupert Kerrigan bolt into the radio chamber and slam the door, according to plan.

Just then four huskies came racing after Kerrigan, hit the door together and knocked it off its hinges. I thought that was going a little too far. After all, Kerrigan was supposed to stay barricaded.

My right hand flamed with agony. I dropped my gun, whirling to see a hard-faced man lowering his weapon.

"Kick it over here."

I obeyed. The four thugs came out of the radio room, carrying Kerrigan.

"He got out an SOS," one of them said.

"Listen," I said, "what is this? Where's Underwood?"

They looked at each other and grinned.

“Underwood, eh? You must be Jerry Morse.”

“Yeah. I don’t know you.”

“You will. Control room, buddy.”

A gun aimed at my kidneys, I was escorted to my destination, the half-unconscious Kerrigan being lugged along behind me. I was beginning to guess the answer, fantastic as it was.

In the control room, Rex Barnaby and Mona Irish were sitting against the wall, white as paper. A man I didn’t know was in the pilot’s seat. Standing straddle-legged before the telechart was a broad-shouldered guy with his back toward me.

“Underwood!” I snarled.

“You’re Morse?”

“Yeah!”

“Underwood couldn’t keep the date. You wanted Percy Ketch, didn’t you? Well, take a good look, sonny.”

There was no beard, but I tried to imagine one on that hard, tanned, gray-eyed face.

“*Yipe!*”

“What is this, Jerry?” Barnaby howled. “What have you got me into?”

“Shut up,” Ketch said. “What have you got there, Jennings?”

Jennings thrust out a slip of radiotape.

“This fellow managed to send out our position. If a patrol ship caught it—”

“Right,” Ketch nodded. “Well, Jennings, you know radio. Stand by for messages. Let me know what you hear. We may have to move fast.”

Ignoring the rest of us, he turned to the telechart and examined it.

“Asteroid not far away, Horton.”

“Got it, chief,” the man in the pilot’s seat said.

“Find a place to hide if we have to.”

“Too much reflection,” Horton said. “We’d show up in this black ship like a comet.”

“Any water?”

“Seems to be.”

“We’ve hidden under water before,” Ketch remarked. “What’s up, Jennings?”

The pirate’s radio man had returned, carrying a wad of tape.

“Patrol ships—close—five hundred miles—coming fast.”

Ketch’s face didn’t change.

“The asteroid, Horton. Any ray charges?”

“Just sidearms,” Jennings scowled.

“Well, we’ll have to hide, till the patrol ships scatter. Then we can slip away. There are places where we can get cannon charges.”

“You can’t do this!” Barnaby yelled suddenly. “I’m Rex Barnaby!”

“I’m Percy Ketch,” the big pirate smiled. “It was flattering to find out you were making a picture about me. But you’d have made a bad mistake in the ending. I didn’t die on Ceres.”

“What I want to know is what your plans are?” I put in.

“I’ll hold you for ransom—most of you. The rest I’ll drop off in a lifeboat. I only kill in action, Morse.”

“You won’t get much ransom out of my hide.”

"All right, you go in the lifeboat. Mona Irish, Rod Kerrigan, the Great Barnaby—I'll pick up a pretty penny with their ransom."

I looked quickly at Mona. She was trying to keep her chin from trembling.

"Here we go," the pilot said. "Hold on!"

We swooped down. The visiplat showed a small asteroid beneath us, its surface shining with a brassy, coppery glare except where occasional lakes were visible. Toward one of the latter we plunged, a small tarn amid rocky crags.

We hit with a splash, though the pilot had braked our landing with nose-rockets. I hoped the turmoil would be visible to the patrol ships, but I knew it was a futile hope.

The *Raider* lurched, rolled and came to rest on the little lake. That surprised me, for spaceships are hefty. But I realized that the newer steel alloys were lighter even than aluminum, and the specific gravity of the ship *in toto* was less than it seemed. And the black hull, on this shining surface, was plenty visible!

"Ballast tanks!" Ketch snapped. "We've got to submerge."

Horton's fingers flickered over the control. On the visiscreen the murky waters crept up. In a minute or so Ketch nodded.

"Okay. We're thirty feet under—that's plenty. What is this stuff? It isn't water."

Jennings made a test.

"It's CuSO₄, chief. No good."

"No." Ketch nodded at me. "I found gold twice on asteroids, and I keep hoping. Sit down, Morse. We'll have some beer and talk things over. This is the first chance I've had to relax since I lost the *Raider*. Thanks for the repair job, by the way, Barnaby."

Barnaby groaned.

Kerrigan was recovering consciousness. He saw me and glared accusingly.

"They hit me!" he said.

"Well," I told him, "you got a message out, anyway. Maybe the patrol ships will locate us."

Ketch shook his head.

"Not a chance. We're thirty feet under a bright reflecting surface. Have some beer." One of his crew had brought bottles, and the pirate passed them around.

"Good," he remarked. "Jennings, where are the rest?"

"Locked in the brig."

Ketch chuckled.

"Even the brig's in good repair. You threw this right in my lap, Barnaby."

"How in space did you do it?" I asked, drinking.

"Remember when we were gunned down on Ceres? I had extra lifeboats hidden there. Not all my crew were killed. We made a getaway—and hid out. I shaved my beard, naturally."

"How did you find out about—"

"Publicity, Morse. That's your job, isn't it? I read in the newstapes that Barnaby was having the *Raider* repaired. Naturally, I didn't know the repair job would be perfect, but I figured I might have a chance to hijack the ship. You threw it right in my lap when you framed that publicity gag."

"Underwood told you?"

"No. You'd hired six men to help him. One of them was in touch with me. I got my boys together and put your hired crew out of the way, along with Underwood."

“We took their places on the *Raider* and nobody knew the difference. You were the only guy who knew exactly which extras you’d hired, so I kept you drugged till we were ready.”

“I’m going crazy,” Barnaby moaned.

“Think of the publicity,” Ketch smiled. “The ransom will be pretty high, I’ll admit, but your picture ought to make a lot of money. But why talk shop? Feel that you are my guests, gentlemen—and Miss Irish.”

Mona stood up.

“Then I’m going to my cabin,” she announced. “And if anybody comes near me, I’ll scream.”

Ketch stood up too.

“You’ll find the key still in your door. If you need anything, ring.”

Mona left. I was realizing that I had to get her out of this scrape. In a way, it was my fault. But, regardless of that, I wasn’t going to be shoved off in a lifeboat and leave Mona as Ketch’s captive.

If I could get a signal to the patrol boats—

I drank more beer and looked thoughtfully at Ketch.

“I can go anywhere I want?” I asked him.

“Sure,” he said. “Make yourself at home.”

I didn’t take advantage of his invitation till later, when I left him immersed in a poker game with Barnaby. Barnaby wanted Ketch to star in *Black Rover*. The picture would be shot secretly, and Ketch’s safety would be guaranteed—by Barnaby.

He was trying to talk the pirate into a screwball proposition like that! Ketch managed not to laugh.

Kerrigan looked ready to pass out again, so I took him to his cabin. After that, I prowled around the ship. I knocked on Mona’s door.

“Are you all right? This is Jerry.”

“Y-yes. Oh, Jerry—”

“Keep your chin up,” I advised her, and went on my merry way. The radio room was guarded. The pirate at the door apologized for not letting me in. I wandered off in search of insulated wire.

The auxiliary power room, with its generator, was unguarded. I turned up the juice, not much, and didn’t think anyone would notice.

Finally I found a spacesuit. The oxygen tank was gone. Ketch had taken precautions.

I couldn’t get far without oxygen. But I could get a short distance away from the ship. Whether or not I could make it back I didn’t know. I took a chance, connected my wire, and led it out one of the tiny rocket-tubes. Then I put on the spacesuit and left by the regular port valve.

I think Jennings saw me go, but he knew I wasn’t going far.

The flexible valve ladder came in handy. I located the wire from the rocket-tube and connected it carefully. By that time I was nearly dead for lack of oxygen.

But I went back up the ladder, somehow, though at the last I was barely conscious. I hammered at the fastenings with my fists, blindly, till air gushed into my lungs.

I clambered out of the suit and returned to the control room. Ketch winked at me over his beer.

“Been for a walk?” he asked.

“Go to Pluto,” I said.

“Now look,” Barnaby was saying persuasively, “Why don’t you forget this ransom business and play along with me? *Black Rover*, starring Percy Ketch! The patrol wouldn’t know a thing about it till the flicker was canned.”

“If you’ll guarantee a personal appearance tour, it’s a deal,” Ketch said, winking at me. “This lad is crazy, Morse. Doesn’t he know he’d be sent up for life?”

“I hope he is,” I growled.

“Shut up, Jerry,” Barnaby commanded imperiously. “Ketch knows I’m talking sense.”

“The patrol ships are spreading out, chief,” Jennings said at the door:

“They haven’t located us yet, and they’ve circled this asteroid.”

“Fine. We’ll all get some sleep. Set up the regular guard, Jennings.” Ketch yawned. “If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen—”

He went out. I gave Barnaby a parting glare and followed.

It was ten hours later when we took off, in a geyser of spray. The patrol ships were so scattered that the pirate craft, built for invisibility, could slip through their cordon easily. There wasn’t the slightest danger.

We were all breakfasting together in the control room when Jennings burst in wild-eyed.

“Chief!” he yelled. “They’ve spotted us!”

“You’re crazy,” the pirate said calmly, drinking coffee. “They’re not that close.”

“They weren’t—but they are now. They *see* us!”

“They can’t see a black ship.”

“All right,” Jennings sighed. “But they do. They’re signalling us to heave to.”

Ketch turned to the pilot.

“Dodge ’em. Throw off pursuit. That’ll do the trick.”

For answer a gauge on the instrument panel flamed red. The pilot gulped.

“A heat-ray on our bow, chief.”

“Dodge! They can’t see a black ship!”

“The *Raider* isn’t a black ship any more,” I said.

“What?”

“The hull’s not black alloy now. It’s copper-colored. It reflects light. We’re a beautiful target, and those patrol ships can follow us from here to Pluto.”

Ketch put down his cup carefully.

“What kind of double-talk is this? The patrol—”

“They know the *Raider*’s lines. They’ll stop us, with heat-cannon, if necessary.”

“Coppery—”

“Sure. We were floating free in a lake of CuSO_4 —copper sulphate solution. The rocks beneath us were copper. I hooked an insulated wire to the ship’s generator and turned on just enough juice to do the trick.

“The *Raider*’s hull was burnished alloy, Ketch—which made it a swell cathode. Don’t you know what happens if you put electrodes in a copper sulphate solution and pass current through it?”

“You—electroplated the ship!”

“Right. Result—we’ve a beautiful copper plating that makes us visible to the patrol ships.”

Ketch took out his gun.

“We’ll fight.”

“You’ve only sidearms. No cannon charges.”

“I’m not going to be taken alive,” he said slowly.

I nodded.

“That makes sense. If it comes to a hand-to-hand fight, plenty of us are going to get hurt. But there are lifeboats. They’re still dead-black. And a lot smaller than the *Raider*. You can get away in the lifeboats.”

“Fair enough. And Barnaby, Kerrigan and the girl will go with us. I still want that ransom.” He snapped a quick order to Jennings, who raced away. An alarm sounded through the ship.

The pilot glanced up. Ketch nodded to him, and he followed Jennings hurriedly.

I jumped for the door and got through it just in time, slamming it after me. I heard the sharp clap of Ketch’s heat-gun. Farther along the corridor, Jennings and the pilot swung around at the sound. I flattened myself against the wall. The door was jerked open, and Ketch lunged across the threshold, heat-gun in his hand.

Both Jennings and his companion had their weapons out now, but they dared not fire for fear of hitting their leader. I clamped down on his gun, trying to kick his legs from under him at the same time.

He went down—and I had the gun!

Clap-clap! That was Jennings, firing. But he had aimed too high, in his anxiety not to hit Ketch, and the bolts missed. Meantime I was back in the control room, slamming and locking the door just as the pirate chief hurled himself against the metal panel.

I seared the lock into fused metal. Then I sealed the door, drawing the heat-ray along the cracks till it was solid with the wall. Barnaby yelled something, but I scarcely heard him.

“Mona! Throw me that chair! Rex—that table! Everything metal you can find or rip free—quick!”

The three of them scurried around the room, tossing me every metallic object they could find. I piled it all against the door and fused it with the ray gun. The pirates were trying to burn their way through from the other side, but I was fusing new barriers as fast as they burned away the old ones.

Barnaby and Kerrigan managed to wrench away the whole instrument desk, a huge affair of metal alloy. Grunting, straining, they pushed it toward me. Mona and I added our weight, and that big chunk of metal thudded against the door with a crash. Instantly I went to work on it. It would take Ketch a long while to burn through *that!*

There was nothing else left. We had to stand there, waiting the first *clap-clap* that would burst through the barrier.

But it didn’t come. An alarm bell clanged sharply instead. That meant another ship was close—plenty close.

Two minutes after that I felt the slight jolts that meant the lifeboats had blasted free.

The visiplate showed the three tiny vessels darting away like black midges, quickly lost in the darkness of space.

“Fine,” I said. “Now we just wait for the patrol ships. If Ketch gets away this time, he deserves to.”

“Jerry,” Mona said. “You were wonderful. And I’m going to faint.”

She did. I tripped up Kerrigan neatly and managed to collect her in my arms. Maybe she was shamming. I decided to kiss her and find out.

But I was interrupted. That, my friends, is why Rex Barnaby won't let me do publicity on his pictures anymore—even though the newstape splash on *Black Rover* built up to the biggest B. O. gross in years, and got me a fat salary raise from Super Films.

I was just starting to kiss Mona when Rex Barnaby grabbed my shoulder.

“Listen, wise guy, who told you to copper plate this ship? If you'd minded your own business, I'd have got Percy Ketch to star in *Black Rover* himself.”

At this point I hit him.

Right on the nose—after that, even Mona's kiss was an anticlimax.

[The end of *Percy the Pirate* by Henry Kuttner]