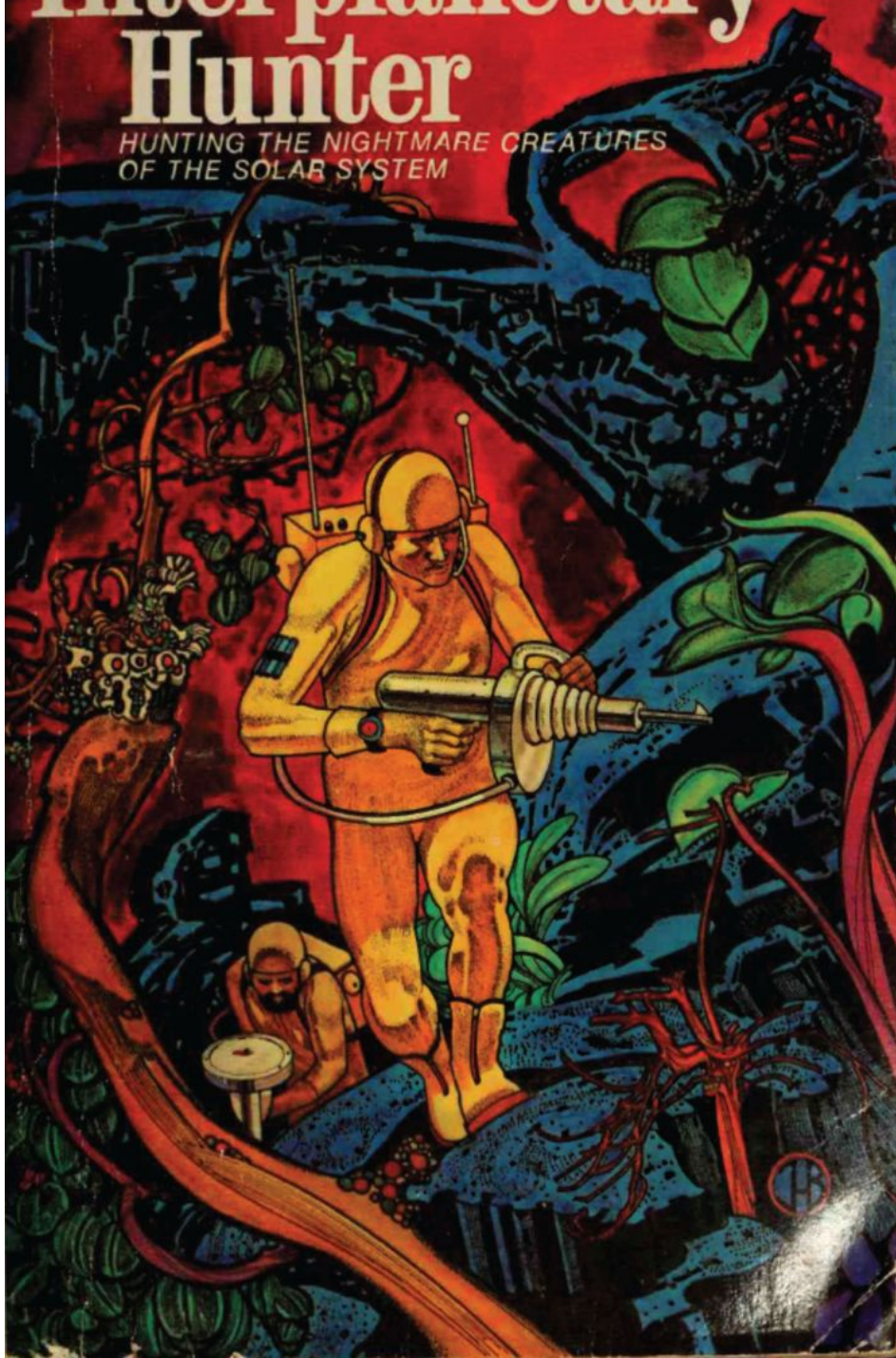


ARTHUR K. BARNES

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Interplanetary Hunter

HUNTING THE NIGHTMARE CREATURES
OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM



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Title: Interplanetary Hunter

Date of first publication: 1937

Author: Arthur K. Barnes (1909-1969)

Date first posted: Aug. 25, 2022

Date last updated: Aug. 25, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220852

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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 hangings 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. . . .

From "Venus," one of the five fascinating adventures in INTERPLANETARY HUNTER.

**Interplanetary
Hunter**
by **Arthur K. Barnes**

ACE BOOKS

**A Division of Charter Communications Inc.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036**

INTERPLANETARY HUNTER

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STANDARD MAGAZINES INC.
1937, 1938, 1940, 1941, and 1946.
An Ace Book.

First Ace printing: September, 1972

Printed in U.S.A.

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VENUS

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 life-forms. 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 to 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 refreshin' 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's 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 space-port 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 space-port. 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 stern 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, anti-gravity, 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 belly of the ship. For, awaiting him there, one hand outstretched and a cool little smile on her lips, stood the most beautiful girl 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 girl 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, wilful, 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. Occasionally a rough gem of one kind or another, though Venus is very poor in minerals. The only stone really worth much to be found up 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 anything 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. They reminded him constantly that battle and destruction were the watchwords in this hellhole, where the fang of every creature was turned upon its neighbor and even the plants had poisoned 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 life-forms here exist only a single day—they are born, live and die in one hundred and seventy hours. Naturally their life cycle is speeded up. In a few 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 girl'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 girl with caution and distaste. Her aggressiveness was not to his taste.

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 hang 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 girl, 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 men 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 perfumes, is laid out almost geometrically in order to catch the diluted sunshine without interference from the occasionally lonely 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. “Shovel-mouth,” 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. The girl’s 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 the girl, 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 shovel-mouth.

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 shovel-mouth 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, low-lying 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 men 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 shovel-mouth'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?” The girl 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 men 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.”

The girl 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 girl talked the party had prepared the motionless shovel-mouth for transportation back to *The Ark*. Broad bands of bluish metal had been fastened around legs and neck and the men 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 shovel-mouth 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.

“Anti-gravity,” explained the girl. “We give the metal banks 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 shovel-mouth 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 the electron streams of all kinds of light, from ultra-violet 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 life-forms 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 sully 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 life-forms 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 despatched 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 midst, 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 men 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 the girl 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 the girl’s 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 girl 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 the girl’s 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—her charm and beauty—that nature intended her to use for that purpose.

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 pathetic of beings—a woman who dared not 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.

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 girl 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 the girl. "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 the girl.

"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 were 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 *Murris* at close quarters. They were quite tame. The close inspection revealed three facts of interest. The first was the presence of a short, prehensile tail equipped with a vicious-appearing sting near the tip.

"Only a weak defensive mechanism," Strike explained, "as *Murris* live almost exclusively on the datelike fruits of the tree they live in. The sting's no worse than a beesting." 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 native’s 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 setup 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 girl rigged up two makeshift straightjackets to hold the captive *Murris* rigidly unmoving. Meanwhile, the other hunters spread the big net again and shot down another branchful of the curious *Murris*. 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 girl again.

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, hanging frantically to Strike’s sturdy arm. The *Murris*’ 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 girl, needing a man’s comfort but not knowing how to get it.

“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 temperature—”

“Doesn’t affect them. They evolved from an aqueous life-form 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 anti-gravity 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 detector’s 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 those 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 the girl, 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 gill-like 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 aimless 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 anti-gravity plates fastened to the tree trunk the greatest threat to the *Murris*. 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 anti-gravity 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 anti-gravity 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?*”



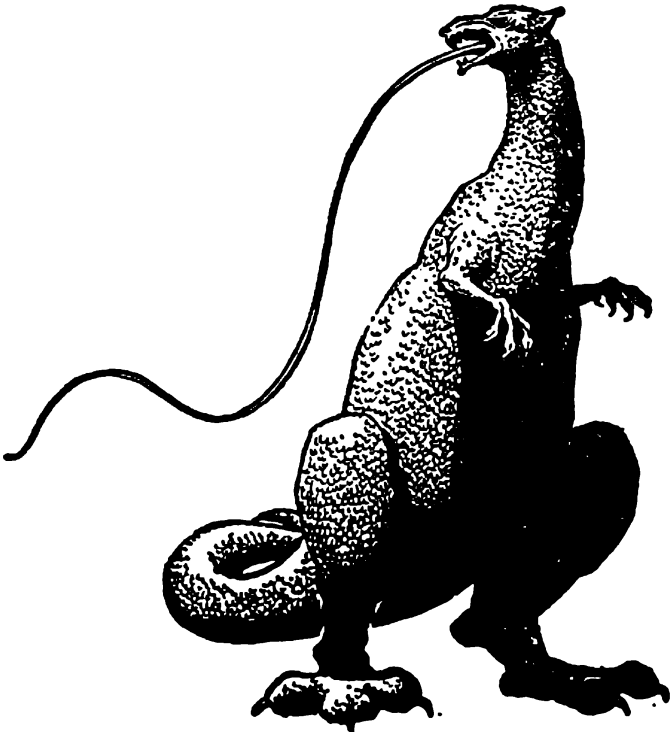
MURRI (MURRIS pl.)
(Pseudo-simia Murri)

Named for the great pioneer explorer Sidney Murray. Murris resemble the Proboscis monkey of Earth; and are a grayish-brown in color with scanty hair growths on their backs. They have large brown eyes and constantly murmur, "*Murri-Murri-Murri.*"



SHOVEL-MOUTH

This monster is fifty feet long and twenty wide, has three pairs of squat powerful legs ending in enormously spatulate discs. It has a tough gray hide. The head is a broad mammoth snout several feet from corner to corner. Herbivorous, it uses its mouth as a scoop and plows through the Venusian marshes scooping up its food.



WHIP

This monster towers nearly fifty feet into the air, standing upright on two massive legs. A set of short forelegs equipped with claws and a long narrow wolf-like head, with two large fangs and small ears, describes the most vicious animal on Venus. Its tongue is fifty feet long and razor sharp.

JUPITER

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 rabbit-like 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 girl 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’s 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 cannon-ball 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 extra-terrestrial life-forms, 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 men 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 had 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 cell 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’hôtel*, is naming a sandwich after me. A double-decker: hard-boiled 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 extra-terrestrial 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 facility.”

“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 interoffice 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 girl 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.”

Events marched swiftly moving inevitably into place the strange pattern that spelled disaster. Tommy Strike was busy over radio and telephone, giving 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 space-port 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 heat-ray 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 how to work it, then beat it. I had the space-port guards hang onto 'im 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 men 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 t’ 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 given 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 want—”

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

“Okay by you, Miss Carlyle?”

Gerry nodded. She was a girl 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 L.I.Z. 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 space-port.

"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. 'Some dame in pants!' Go on from there."

"Uh—exactly, miss. While some dame in pants 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 space-ports 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 air-lock 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 whole-hearted blistering of everyone and everything connected with this ghastly game.

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, but the toughest, most hard-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 men 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 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 men 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 rocket-tubes if it ain’t a dame!” the big fellow exploded.

“I’m Gerry Carlyle,” the girl 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 men’s living quarters. A blast of warm air struck their faces as the door opened, and everyone shucked off his furs. There were four more men inside and one of them, with black spade beard and dark, flashing eyes, was obviously a Frenchman.

“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 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 fiancé 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 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 what tough guys 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 the girl left, broken finally by sheepish stirrings and a muttered, “Whew!”

Of all the men 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 single 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 girl 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 sealed 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 rocket-tubes 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.

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 under-rockets 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 rocket-tube 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 assignation 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 man-fashion and squeezed hard.

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

They piled into space-suits, Gerry seized the paralysis equipment, and the two left the wreckage. There was nothing moving in sight on the fairly level plane, sprawled 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 slug-like 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 the girl shouted into her headset, "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 extra-terrestrial 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 her 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 heat-ray 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 heat-ray, 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 damnedest 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 air-lock, and they gave the second Cacus full-power heat-ray. 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 bi-sexual,” 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 heat-ray, 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 heat-ray 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.”

The girl 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 men 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 men 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 the men 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 System, Lord knows how, and isn't native here. But that won't help subduing it."

"Rats! How about anaesthetic 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 anaesthetic gas as well.

"Well," said Gerry cheerfully, "I guess we'll just have to quit playing games."

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 nightshade 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 space-suit 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 space-suits 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 men would never under any circumstances allow Gerry to try it, so she was forced to call for volunteers. To the last man, 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 a 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—"

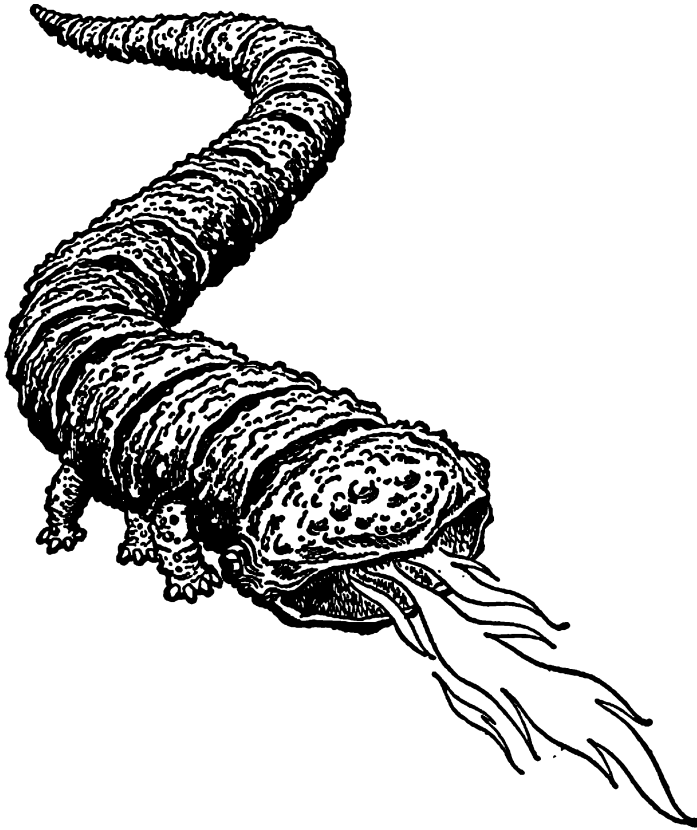
"Death?" Duval somehow managed a shrug. "Death, yes. But what a death of the most heroic!" And with supreme courtesy to the last, Duval

carefully rolled over to face the wall, that a lady 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.”



CACUS (Super)
(Native to Satellite Five)

So named because of the Cacus in Vergil's Aeneid which spouted fire. The Cacus is about twenty feet long. It has a warty gray hide which is divided into armored sections along its length, with soft spots between the plates. It is oval-shaped in its lateral cross-section. It has six short legs about a quarter of the way down its underside, arranged with no particular symmetry, just stuck here and there. Two eyes are set on either side of the head. Instead of true teeth the entire inner mouth is composed of a kind of flexible horny growth which probably serves for mastication—when and if necessary. Every available crevice is veined with a gray, spongy mass which is composed of platinum. The gases formed from digestion, passing over this spongy mass causes the flames which the Cacus breathes out. The Cacus is bi-sexual and self-fertilizing.

NEPTUNE

Gerry Carlyle draped herself over the functionally-designed Plastair and nibbled moodily at a long, curl. She had just discovered how vulnerable she was and, like all-important public figures who happen to find themselves in such a situation, she was annoyed.

That she was important, no one could deny. Beautiful, rich, she was also amazingly successful in a profession so rigorous and exacting that not one man in a thousand would dare face the dangers and hardships and excitement that she faced almost daily.

And yet, for all this, Gerry was very vulnerable in one regard. Like all champions, she couldn't pass up a dare or a challenge, no matter what its nature. She had to take on all comers, and she had just realized that fact.

"The nerve of that fellow!" she muttered, then looked up in annoyance at her fiancé, Tommy Strike. "You're none too sympathetic, either. What are you pacing around for?"

"Just trying out the new flooring," Strike grinned.

The pilot room and main corridors of *The Ark* had just been refloored with zincal, the new metal, plastic, air bubble combination which gave under the foot like an expensive rug, but which never showed signs of wear.

Gerry pouted.

"Well, you might show a little interest," she said. "After all, you're second in command around here."

"You've been mumbling to yourself for the past half hour," Tommy Strike pointed out. "How do you expect me to know what it's all about? If you care to commence at the commencement, in words of one syllable, so my dull wits can grasp whatever it is that has so upset you, perhaps I'll listen."

Gerry gave her man a smoky, heavy-lidded glance, smiled, and made room for him on the Plastair.

"It's this fellow Dacres," she began. "He came around the other day with a business proposition. Said he wanted to use *The Ark* to rescue his brother whose expedition has apparently cracked up on Triton. He offered to finance the whole thing, with me furnishing the regular crew. He would simply be a

passenger. Naturally, I turned him down. Gerry Carlyle does not run a taxi service.”

“Triton, eh?” Strike grunted. “Neptune’s only satellite. And with a very nasty reputation. Isn’t that the place that’s never been explored?”

“That’s the place, all right. Two or three expeditions tried it. None ever returned.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember reading about that. They call it the ‘siren satellite.’ Very dramatic. And also a very long way from here. Your pal Dacres must be well off to be able to afford such a jaunt.”

Gerry tossed her blonde hair.

“He’s no pal of mine!” she said, hotly. “Wait till you hear what he did! He’s black-mailing me!”

“Ah!”

“He’s gone to all the papers and telefilm services and spread the story that I refused to rescue his brother because the rumors about Triton have scared me off. How do you like that?”

She leaned over, snapped the telenews switch, and pointed to the wall-screen. A headline flashed on.

GERRY CARLYLE SPURNS RESCUE PLEA!

Angrily, Gerry spun a dial to reveal a second lead.

QUEEN OF HUNTRESSES SHIES AWAY FROM TRITON CHALLENGE!

Miss Gerry Carlyle, the Catch-’em-Alive girl renowned the world over for her adventures while raiding the Solar System for weird monsters, today rejected the plea of Lawrence Dacres that she put her spaceship, *The Ark*, at his disposal for the rescue of his brother, believed lost on Triton.

Mr. Dacres alleges that fear of unknown forces upon the lonely, unexplored satellite of Neptune prompted the refusal.

It is true that Triton’s record of being the grave of more than one ill-fated expedition is cause enough to make anyone wary. But if, as is asserted, something has been discovered at last which gives pause to the redoubtable Miss Carlyle, then man, indeed, bites dog.

Gerry's furious fingers again moved, and a third line of heavy type declared:

SWEETHEART OF SPACE SHUNS SIREN
SATELLITE!

Strike chuckled. Gerry interrupted.

"I had a few words with the editor who dreamed that one up," she said with quietly vicious satisfaction. "He is now resting in a sanitarium."

Strike sighed.

"I can see what an awkward position it puts you in," he admitted. "The Dacres fellow's already tried the case in the press and found you guilty of something or other."

He rose, walked around behind Gerry. Presently his voice came again, musingly.

"Now let's see. Triton. Diameter, three thousand miles. Revolution, five days, seven hours, three minutes. Stellar magnitude—"

"You sound like an encyclopedia." Gerry twisted around, trying to see.

"That's because I'm reading from an encyclopedia, I'll bet . . . Stellar magnitude at opposition, thirteen. Retrograde motion. Gravity, two and a half times that of Earth—Oh, yeah. That's why they call it the 'siren satellite.' It lures the unwary space-traveler close, then hauls him in with the unexpected gravity . . . Mm-m. Composed of matter not native to the Solar System—hence the terrific mass. Believed to be a wanderer from space trapped by Neptune. That would explain the retrograde motion."

Brisk, muffled footsteps sounded along the corridor, followed by an impatient knock on the pilot room door.

"That'll be friend Dacres now," Gerry grimaced. "Come in!"

Dacres made his entrance. He was not self-important, but he was imposing, and whenever he entered a room he would inevitably command attention. He was tall, slender in the manner of a rapier, and blonde. He bowed stiffly.

"Good morning, Miss Carlyle," he said.

Gerry almost expected to hear his heels click. She introduced the two men, mentally comparing them.

"So you've come to apologize for your insufferable conduct?" she said then.

“I’ve come to see if you have reconsidered your unfriendly and uncooperative attitude,” he amended.

Gerry began to incandesce.

“Why, you—you—” she could scarcely contain herself. “You deliberately spread lies and false insinuations through the press, making me a laughing-stock, blasting my reputation, impugning my courage! And now you have the crust to pretend that *I’m* in the wrong for not throwing my whole organization into the lap of every would-be joyrider who comes along! You’re nothing but a blackmailer!”

Dacres refused to be stampeded.

“Sorry to exert pressure on you in such fashion, Miss Carlyle,” he said, unperturbed. “As you imply, however, I have no scruples. None, at least, when my brother’s life is at stake.”

Gerry found it hard to answer that one. She had tried unsuccessfully to answer it ever since Dacres had first spoken to her. The blond man knew this, and pursued his advantage.

“While we argue here,” he pointed out, “my brother and his crew may be dying—slowly being crushed flat by the terrible gravity. He weighed two hundred on Earth. Up there, he’d weigh five hundred. The human heart simply cannot stand that kind of punishment. It’ll quit.”

The words conjured an unpleasant picture of freezing, starving men crawling painfully about like injured crabs, praying for quick release from agony. Gerry winced.

“Weren’t the explorers equipped with degrav units?” she asked.

“Yes, but how long will they last? A couple of weeks at low power, possibly. Then—” Dacres brought his palms together with slow expressiveness. “That’s why every second is precious.”

Gerry felt cornered, and she glanced at Tommy Strike in an exasperated appeal for reinforcement. But Strike was strictly neutral. If anything, he found her predicament amusing, taking a perverse delight in seeing her humbled by the opposite sex.

She made one last try.

“Why pick on me, Mr. Dacres?” she asked. “Why is it so essential to have my ship, and only mine?”

“Rocket ships visiting Triton, however powerful, have so far all cracked up. Complete safety demands the tremendous power of a centrifugal flyer, like *The Ark*. How many such ships exist today? A handful. And how many of those are owned by other than government agencies? Only yours, Miss

Carlyle. If you refuse me, I shall have to try and find a lesser ship. But I'm staking a great deal on having publicly put you into an intolerable position, so you can't afford to turn me down."

Gerry gasped. The fellow was certainly frank about it. What's more, he seemed to have all the answers. If she were ready to quit her romantic and risky business and settle down, she could safely say no. But as long as she wished to remain queen of the space-rovers, she dared not let a single questionable act stain her record.

She looked despairingly at Strike, but he simply shrugged, grinning faintly.

"Well, here we go again," he said.

Dacres tendered an olive branch.

"There might, of course, be some interesting alien life-forms on Triton. After the rescue is completed, you'd be welcome to try for a couple of specimens, if that would enable you to—er—save face."

Gerry felt her temperature climb to a new high, and she counted ten, then stood up.

"You are insulting, Mr. Dacres," she announced. "I do not like you. The only reason my fiancé has not knocked you down is because he feels I sometimes think too highly of myself, and that a dressing down does me good. However, your brother's peril and your own machinations force me to accept your proposition. Come back in an hour with your checkbook and your attorney. Our contract will be ready for you. We can leave at dawn."

Dacres bowed again, very tall and ever so slightly triumphant.

"Thank you," he said. "I regret our inability to be friends but, after all, that is unimportant. I'm sure we'll manage a successful and uneventful voyage."

He stalked out, ramrod-stiff.

"Whew!" Strike shook himself like a big dog. "The electric potential of this room must be terrific. Think I'll go outside and ground myself. I've never seen a fellow so completely right every time he opens his mouth. Most disconcerting." He laughed.

Lawrence Dacres seemed to have been in error once, however, when he predicted a journey without incident. Just before reaching Mars, five of *The Ark's* crew became violently ill after dinner.

"Food poisoning," was the verdict in the Martian hospital. The men were out of danger and would be released in two or three days, but as *The Ark* had left Earth with only a skeleton crew, in order to save expense, a serious

problem was now at hand. Dacres, frantic at delay which cost him hundreds of dollars a day, suggested that he recruit replacements at the Martian spaceport.

“We must get under way at once, Miss Carlyle,” he said, “or I’ll go broke just waiting here. After all, it wasn’t your key men who became ill, just subordinates. The chief engineer, for instance, is all right. He could get along with new men for just this one trip.”

It was true. On a routine journey such as this, Gerry had no need of the special qualifications and training which made those sick men expert hunters, trappers, and zoologists, as well as engineers. Any good mechanics could replace them.

So she agreed. But she couldn’t help feeling that, conceived in anger and already stricken with misfortune, the expedition was ill-starred.

It was Tommy who, several hours out from Mars, stumbled upon an extraordinary and amusing scene which suggested that the journey was indeed fated to be anything but routine. Glancing in through a half-open door in the crew’s quarters, he observed a man, a total stranger, going through weird antics. The newcomer, holding his head very gingerly between his hands, as if it were about to explode, walked about the small but comfortable room with awkwardly high steps.

When he paused to glare at himself in the mirror, Strike grinned at the homely reflection the man saw. For the fellow was the epitome of a battered, broken-down boxer—flat nose, lumpy cheeks, scar tissue under the brows, cauliflower ears.

Turning away from the mirror the stranger staggered to a porthole to look out. Then he reeled back with a stricken, bewildered expression, groaning.

Strike leaned quietly against the door jamb, watching. And so gradually, both he and the broken-down pugilist became aware of voices in the next room, voices hushed but intense. The ex-bruiser wobbled over to the door, plastered his ear to the surface.

“Monk, you fool!” came the voice. “How the devil did that tramp get aboard?”

There was a shuffle of feet.

“Boss, I swear I dunno,” came the conciliatory reply. “We didn’t expect you right away, so we was havin’ ourselves a time.”

“A drunken carousal, you mean?”

“Okay, have it your way. Anyhow, when your message come, we headed for the space-port, but everything was pretty happy, see, an’ this fellow must have got sort of attached to the party, an’—” Monk’s voice trailed away. “As a matter of fact, I don’t much remember exactly what did happen.”

“So when you checked in, seven souse-pots instead of six, no one thought anything of it. Beautiful!” The invisible speaker was very bitter. “Well, the tramp’s aboard now, and the damage is done. I suppose I should have met you myself. Question is—”

The lumpy-faced man suddenly shoved open the door. Strike remained where he was, unseen to watch. Six tough-fisted mechanics, the men recruited by Dacres in the emergency, were shifting their feet uneasily as Dacres tongue-lashed them. Strike frowned slightly. He would have to remind the tall, blond Dacres that it was the captain alone who had the right to discipline the men.

Then the unidentified, clown-faced man spoke.

“You!” he snapped out. “Who’re you?”

“Lawrence Dacres, and keep a civil tongue in your head.”

“You shanghaied me aboard this here spaceship, Dacres, an’ I demand you turn around and take me back to Mars pronto. Or else!”

There was a round of mirth, and Strike moved nearer ready to take a hand. The strange, lumpy-faced man purpled.

“I mean it,” he declared. “D’you know who I am?”

“Don’t tell us. Let us guess.” The heavy irony came from Monk, the man who had been trying to explain how the extra person had come aboard at the space-port.

“I’m Kid McCray, the Martian middleweight champion, that’s who!”

The crewmen dissolved into the helpless hilarity of complete disbelief, and Strike fought back his own urge to laugh. Middleweight McCray ranted and stormed, trying to convince them of his sincerity. It was useless. In fury, he doubled his fist and sprang at Dacres.

However, Strike decided, whatever ring experience McCray might have had didn’t include the trickiness of moving out in space. His lunge carried him well off the floor. He sailed, floundering, like a man in deep water, awkward and off balance. In this defenseless position, the blond man’s punch caught him flush on the jaw and slammed him head-first against the steel wall.

McCray took a full count.

“Nobody can do this to me,” he muttered dizzily, and shakily when he managed to stand again.

The crewmen were weeping in their joy.

“The champ’s off form today!” the guffawing Monk yelled. “He ain’t so good in the light gravity!”

Strike thought it about time to intervene, so he stepped into the room. There was a sudden silence of frozen attitudes and wary eyes.

“Oh, Captain Strike,” Dacres said, relaxing. “Glad you’re here. If you overheard what’s been going on, you realize that we have a stowaway with some peculiar notions in his head aboard.”

“I understand, Dacres.” Strike tried to look sternly at the groggy, clown-faced McCray. “Just how *did* you get on the ship?”

“Well,”—McCray screwed up his face in thought—“Well, there was the fight, see? First championship bout ever held on Mars. I win by a kayo in the eleventh. Then we celebrated—parties, taverns, lots o’ girls . . . Then I don’t remember nothin’ till a few minutes ago.” He looked very baffled “Doncha believe me?”

Obviously, the various celebrants had somehow formed into one big party during the gay evening. It sounded like a fight night. There probably had been a fight. But as for a man with a face like McCray’s being a champion—

Strike and Dacres exchanged sad smiles, and Dacres motioned with one finger to his temple.

“Perhaps a few weeks’ work will straighten out your thinking, McCray,” Strike said. “Well go and see my partner, and you’d better act sensibly because technically you’re subject to severe penalties. Here. Slip these on.”

He kicked over a pair of gravity clogs—thick metal plates containing a power unit to adjust the wearer against differing gravities. Straps fastened them to the feet. Everyone else was wearing them. They enabled scrambled-ears McCray to follow Strike and Dacres up the long corridor to the elevator leading to the flight deck.

Tommy Strike noted with satisfaction McCray’s reaction, as the pugilist’s eyes fell on the copper-blond beauty of the ship’s famous mistress.

“Holy Smoke!” McCray goggled at her. “You’re Gerry Carlyle!”

In the questioning silence that followed, Strike explained.

“We have a stowaway, Gerry,” he said. “Unintentional. Says he came aboard by mistake in a moment of alcoholic aberration. No one of us

realized he wasn't one of the new men. He seems to be a bit punch-drunk."

The uninvited guest snapped out of it with a roar.

"Punch-drunk?" he yelled. "Listen, you! I'm Kid McCray, middleweight champ of Mars! I got influence, an' if you don't take me back to Mars right now, there'll be trouble!"

Strike, Dacres, and Gerry laughed together.

"Oh-oh-h!" gasped the girl. "Those Martian liquors! I've heard they frequently bring on delusions of grandeur!"

However cool a ringman McCray might once have been, he had now had too much. He advanced vengefully upon Strike, his desire to do bodily harm written plainly on his battered face. Remembering his earlier experience, the fighter shuffled forward with determined caution. As a result, Strike found him practically a sitting duck.

Being in the light-heavyweight class, Strike promptly accepted the challenge and clubbed the intruder with a whistling right cross.

McCray spun round, fought clumsily for balance on the gravity clogs, then crashed, bouncing his head off the binnacle. "This just ain't possible," he muttered faintly.

"The 'champ,'" Dacres declared in an amused voice, "isn't so good with the footwork this morning."

"Overtrained, perhaps," offered Gerry.

"Well, we can't put back to Mars, of course," Strike said then. "Better put him to work."

Actually, Strike was not at all sorry. McCray was probably in for some amusingly rough and humiliating hours. He would be assigned to the most menial tasks. He would be referred to derisively as "the Champ." He would have to learn that Space Law dealt ruthlessly with men with too-ready fists. But *The Ark* was on a grim mission, and Strike felt sure that McCray, once he found his place, would be good for many tension-relieving laughs. . . .

Kid McCray was surprisingly persistent, however. Two days later, he button-holed Strike and urged him to radio Mars, on the theory that if there were a missing middleweight champion, that might prove his story.

"Too bad you didn't think of that before," Strike smothered a grin and pointed out solemnly. "We're already too far from Mars for the limited capacity of our ship's radio."

No whit discouraged, McCray again petitioned the captain next day. He had learned the story of Dacres' brother, and the peculiar, untimely illness which had reduced the crew of *The Ark*.

“Don’t that seem kinda odd, Captain?” insisted McCray, striving to look mysterious. “An’ could anybody be so lucky as to find a half-dozen number-one mechanics on Mars at a moment’s notice? Maybe we better turn back right now!”

Strike got endless amusement from the little battles of wits in which McCray clumsily offered varied reasons for returning to Mars. But the ex-fighter’s point about Dacres’ substitute crewmen stuck in his mind. He remembered, too, the conversation he’d overheard the day McCray had awakened on the ship. The exact words escaped him, but hadn’t Dacres been speaking as if to long-time acquaintances? The sudden silence, the suspicious looks when he shoved open the door and entered the room—had they meant anything?

Feeling rather foolish, Strike dropped down to talk with Baumstark, the chief engineer, and was quickly reassured.

“It’s working out fine, sir,” the engineer said. “The new fellows are really topnotch engine men, especially that Monk. Not much to look at, but always asking questions. Probably could run the ship himself right now!”

After that, even McCray seemed to give up trying, tending strictly to business, as the mighty ship fled at astronomical speed through the vast remoteness of the spaceways. Days drifted into weeks. One by one, the major planets’ orbits passed astern. Then, another of those queerly unrelated incidents ruffled the surface of the quiet routine.

McCray was involved, as usual. On an inspection tour, Strike came upon him sprawled on the floor of one of the cabins, nursing a welt above his ear. Standing over him was Monk, a wrench in one hand and a wicked-looking proton pistol in the other.

“Nosey!” Monk was shouting. “Buttinsky! What’s the idea?”

McCray explained fuzzily that he had just been searching for a tool in Monk’s spacebag, and accidentally found the gun.

“Well, next time ask me first,” Monk cried. “Besides, finding I got a gun is nothin’ to get excited about. We’re goin’ to a strange world, an’ it might be dangerous see? We might need some weapons.”

Tommy Strike chose that moment to make his presence known. He lashed Monk verbally, took the gun from him.

“It’s the officers’ duty to take care of the arsenal aboard this ship. No weapons are ever permitted in the men’s quarters.”

Monk scuffed his feet, made a handsome apology, and he and McCray went back to work. Strike watched them pensively, recalling past events, wondering if there were a pattern. On impulse, he searched the belongings

of Dacres' recruits, and found nothing out-of-the-way. Sheepishly, he returned to the flight deck, resolved not to bother Gerry with his suspicions.

That decision proved to be a mistake. The mystery came to a sudden and explosive head before the next changing of the watch. They were only one day out from Triton, and Gerry was making telescopic observations of the satellite.

"I've checked Triton's rotational speed, Tommy," she said. "It spins once around on its axis every forty-five minutes or so. Really rolling down this cosmic bowling alley, eh?"

Those were the most important words Strike had ever heard in his life, though he did not realize it then. Instead, he made idle conversation.

"Yes," he said, "but there's precedent for it. Look at Jupiter—twenty-nine times as large as this marble, counting its atmospheric envelope, rotating once in a bit over nine hours."

As if the words were a cue, the door burst open, and Dacres, Monk, and the other substitute crewmen shouldered through, all armed. In that split second, the entire plot, suspicious of which had been tantalizing Strike for days, was clear.

"So," said Gerry Carlyle, "it's mutiny."

Dacres nodded, smiling, and interpreted correctly her quick glance down the hall.

"It's no use," he said. "All the others have been bound and gagged."

Strike inwardly boiled with astonishment and self-accusation. This was largely his fault. He should have guessed. McCray had practically proved this was coming, but by laughing the fellow off as a "character," he had been criminally blind and stupid.

Yet the other part of his brain admitted his caution had only been natural, that no one in his senses would have credited Dacres with the foolhardy idea of stealing the most famous spaceship in the entire System. The whole situation was crazy.

Dark-faced with fury, Strike put his thought into words.

"Just what d'you think you're going to do, anyhow?"

"We're taking over *The Ark*, camouflaging it and using it for a short career of piracy among the Outer Planets. Perhaps a half-dozen quick strikes, then we all retire wealthy before the law even starts to hunt."

There it was, beautifully simple, grim, dastardly.

"And what about us?" asked the girl.

"So sorry." Dacres smiled hypocritically.

“You and your crew will be packed into a lifeboat and marooned on Triton. Another regrettable accident to another would-be explorer of the ‘siren satellite.’ ”

“That’s murder!” Strike lashed out. “We’ll die there, horribly, crushed flat by that gravity.”

Dacres warned Strike back with his gun.

“Tut, tut, Captain,” he said. “You didn’t think we could afford to leave you alive, to carry tales to any possible rescue parties, did you? It’s all part of my scheme. Everything must appear accidental.”

Strike looked at his fiancée, and was never prouder of her. If the mutineers expected tears or hysteria, they must have been shocked at the hardy defiance of her next remark.

“You’re a fool, Dacres, if you don’t kill us all right now.”

There was implacable hate in the girl’s voice, but Dacres merely grinned.

“Oh, no, Miss Carlyle,” he said, “no shooting. No hint of foul play. I see what’s in your mind. You foresee furious rescue operations when *The Ark* becomes overdue. Naturally, Triton will be searched, and you intend to leave an explanatory message where it will be easily found.

“Spare yourself the trouble, please. We’ll give you a few days—it’d be interesting to see just how long the human heart can endure such strain—then visit your little tomb on Triton. Any messages subsequently found will be written by me, neatly explaining the destruction of *The Ark* in space, with no suggestion of criminal action.”

Hopelessness tied a cramping knot in Strike’s stomach. The plot was not only simple and clever but it would work! Even now Gerry seemed unshaken. She looked slowly around that circle of thieves and murderers as if memorizing their faces for future reference. Then she saw McCray, hiding shamefacedly in the rear. Her eyebrows raised.

“You, too, ‘Champ’? I’m disappointed.”

The pugilist crimsoned.

“The ‘Champ’ had a silly idea that he could remain neutral in this game,” Dacres explained easily. “We can use a muscular man, so we gave him his choice. He chose to live, with us.”

Gerry nodded.

“Just for curiosity,” she said, “do you really have a brother?”

“No. The lost expedition was just window-dressing. Rather nicely done, I thought. We actually arranged for a ship to leave Mars a few months ago

under my charter, in case you checked on it.”

“Swine!” Gerry Carlyle spat the word, and swung her right fist in a haymaker that caromed off Dacres’ nose. Roistering his gun, he wiped his watering eyes and started for Gerry.

At that instant, something happened to McCray. It seemed to Strike that the man’s natural instincts as a fighter and sportsman were aroused by his admiration for a beautiful girl. At any rate, moving expertly now on his clogs, he slid before Gerry.

“Look, lady,” he said. “Always hit straight, not round-house. Like this.”

Then he cracked the blond man a beautiful punch, flush on the button. Dacres fell, out cold. Instantly, Strike whirled on Monk, who was about to draw a bead.

“Remember what he said!” he shouted. “No gunplay!”

For heart-stopping moments, sudden death trembled in the air, as Monk squinted murderously at McCray down the glittering rod of his proton pistol. McCray drew breath again only when Monk drew back with a harsh laugh.

“Okay, bum,” Monk said. “It’s only a matter o’ hours, anyways. Seein’ as how you decided to play with the losin’ team!”

Strike almost smiled when he saw McCray’s transparent face register appalled realization. Kid McCray gulped, looked anxiously at Gerry Carlyle, and then grinned broadly as she winked at him in wordless thanks.

“Oh, well,” he said, strutting ever so faintly, “it ain’t *when* a fellow goes, it’s *how* he goes!”

It was plain Kid McCray considered himself in distinguished company.

Tommy Strike examined his sweaty palms, marked with nail prints left when he had fought down the suicidal impulse to fling himself at Dacres’ piratical crew. Then he looked around the cramped confines of the tiny lifeboat.

Though intended for six, nine persons were packed in the craft. Save for the slap-happy boxer, McCray, whose heart was certainly bigger than his brains, all the occupants were intimate friends, welded together in a unit by adventure and danger, failures and successes. Young Barrows, Kranz, Baumstark—with all of them their proudest boast was that they were envied members of Gerry Carlyle’s entourage.

And now had come the ignominious end of the trail. After each recent hairbreath exploit, Strike had vowed he would marry Gerry and they would

settle down on some peaceful suburban estate. But the excitement in their blood had not been conquered. Now it was too late. Death was the end of this adventure, sure and horrid. And Strike felt himself to blame.

The seething silence, brought on by the enormity of Dacres' daring to lay a hand upon their beloved leader, was broken by Kranz.

"I hear the gravity down there is two-and-a-half Gs," he said. "We might as well make a break for it right now. Go down fighting, anyhow."

Strike shrugged.

"It's no use. Dacres has—"

A sudden thought made Strike examine the fuel gauge, but though there was enough fuel to take them to Triton, there was not nearly enough to enable them to try a dash for the nearest outpost in the Uranian System. He ground his teeth.

"No, that bird has thought of everything," he sighed. "I said that the first day I talked to him. It's still true."

"Exception, please," Gerry interposed suddenly. "Mr. Dacres has forgotten one thing—mathematics. Just take it quietly, men. Our inning may yet come."

Tommy and the others stared at her, forlorn hope fighting with despair. Strike couldn't see any value in calculus when a man suddenly found himself crushed to the ground by a weight of four hundred and fifty pounds. It would be a task even to pick up a pencil. He was about to argue the matter when a sudden lurch hurled them into a tangle at one end of the little rocket-car. It was too late for debate now—Dacres had thrown the lever catapulting the lifeboat into space.

To the tiny craft's left, and slightly above, *The Ark*, enormous and glittering, receded with uncanny effortlessness. Below and to the right, dollar-size in the cold blackness of interstellar space, the Siren Satellite beckoned irresistibly.

Strike slid into the pilot's seat, for once at a loss as to what to do, and stared at Gerry questioningly. She nodded.

"Triton," she said.

The tubes bucked with miniature thunder, as Strike deftly manipulated the controls. It was but a three-hour journey, but it loomed as the most frightful three hours any of them had ever dreamed of enduring.

While still an hour out from Triton, the pull of that mighty gravity was already making itself felt. If anyone had occasion to move, he took slow, ponderous steps. The increasing weight was endurable while lying prone,

but even so there were whimpers, as invisible but relentless fingers seemed striving to tear loose the internal organs themselves. Barrows was suddenly sick on the floor, and the sight promptly urged three of the others to follow suit.

Strike wound a coil of light rope around himself as an abdominal support. It afforded some relief, but nothing could take the terrible strain from his heart, as it laboriously fought to pump the sluggishly heavy blood through pinched veins. He speculated dispassionately on how long a heart would hold up.

He glanced at Gerry. She lay with her face hidden in her arms, breathing asthmatically. Slowly, her head raised, as if it weighed a ton.

“Tommy,” she spoke thickly, with a tongue that would not obey. “I’m going to—pass out. Head toward—equator—”

She slumped. Though Gerry was vigorous and athletic, her frame was never intended to sustain the ordeal it was subject to now.

Strike saw the others, especially McCray, were taking it fairly well. Most of them had endured several Gs for short moments while stunting or test-flying, but none had ever experienced anything like this ceaseless drag which crushed the chest and threatened to pull the very flesh away from the bones.

Sweat blinded Strike momentarily, and with a leaden hand he wiped it aside. Triton, pale and featureless, loomed large now, revolving with visible motion. The crisis was at hand. The tiny lifeboat plunged with sickening speed, and Strike fought the controls with corded muscles. The jets blasted full in a savage battle against the gravity, and it took all Strike’s skill to keep the ship from rolling off its delicate position atop that vital column of flame.

As the craft thundered in over the swiftly sliding terrain, only luck averted disaster, for Strike’s anchored fingers were too slow for the exacting manipulation of a landing. The craft plowed in fast and hard, swathed in flame, skidding with bone-racking jerks.

The lifeboat made one complete somersault and came to rest—right side up.

The nine castaways sorted themselves out, untangled broken safety belts, stood up, and—suddenly, the realization of a miracle dawned upon them!

Like a bestowing of a soothing, deific benison, the grip of that terrifying, crushing gravity was gone. Utterly gone!

They weighed no more, apparently, than they ever had on Earth!

Each gave thanks or expressed his joy in his own way, but the dominant emotion was aptly expressed by McCray.

“Gosh!” he said. “I don’t get it!”

None of the men understood the phenomenon, but a horrible suspicion was growing in Strike’s mind. He turned to stare at Gerry, who had revived at once with no ill effects.

“You knew this was going to happen!” he said accusingly. “That’s what you meant when you babbled about Dacres and his mathematics. Why didn’t you tell us, spare us some of the mental agony?”

“Sorry,” Gerry blushed faintly. “But I wasn’t at all sure. It would have been an awful disappointment if it hadn’t come off.”

“Never mind that. What’s the angle? Out with it! How come?”

Gerry grinned in reply to this bombardment of queries.

“Patience, m’lord, and I shall demonstrate.” She found pencil, paper, and slide-rule and commenced calculating. “The key to the problem is the fact that Triton’s rotation, once every forty-five minutes, develops a centrifugal force at the equator, the thrust of which neutralizes the pull of its high gravity. Now suppose you weigh a hundred and fifty pounds.”

“But I weigh a hundred and eighty-three,” objected Strike.

“Okay, okay. Just pretend, hunh? So you’d expect to weigh three seventy-five here. But—” Gerry scribbled.

weight = 150 pounds

diam. of Triton = 3000 miles = 1.584×10^7 ft.

radius of Triton = 7.92×10^6 ft.

gravity = 2.5 g

rotation 45 minutes.

$$N = \frac{1}{45} = .0222 \text{ rpm}$$

$$* \omega = \frac{2\pi N}{60} = .00233 \text{ rad/sec}$$

$$m = \frac{150}{g} = \frac{w}{32.2} = 4.81 \text{ slugs}$$

“A slug is actually the name of the engineering unit of mass,” Gerry interrupted herself to explain—quite unnecessarily as most of the others

were well grounded in math.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Centrifugal Force} &= mr\omega^{2*} = 4.81 (7.92) (2.33)^2 = 207 \text{ lbs.} \\ \text{net weight} &= 2.5(150) - 207 = 375 - 207 = 168 \text{ lbs.}\end{aligned}$$

“So!” Gerry concluded triumphantly. “We weigh only a few more pounds at the equator here than we do on Earth, despite the high gravity. The closer we move to the poles, the more we’ll weigh. Of course, I have only a five-inch slide-rule, and the figures may be correct only to two significant figures, but you get the idea.”

“I guess we get it, all right,” Strike muttered, still irritated that Gerry had kept it to herself when they had so desperately needed a ray of hope. “So long as we maintain contact with Triton’s surface, we’re safe. But the moment we lose contact—uh-uh!”

Intrigued by the thought, Barrows experimented with a little upward jump. He promptly came down with a teeth-rattling jolt. No one ventured to duplicate the demonstration. They were effectively held by unseen chains.

“Say!” Strike had another idea. “Dacres will be dropping in again in a few days to write our farewell message for us. If we can rig up a welcome, maybe there’ll be a surprise ending yet to the draymah of ‘Gerry and the Pirates.’ ”

Tense as they were, having undergone terrible physical stress under fear of impending death, the men needed that feeble joke. They roared with laughter, as if it had been brilliantly witty, or even the broadest slapstick gag. They repeated it with variations and comic embroidery till they were emotionally spent, completely relaxed.

Finally, someone made the obvious point that if they were to surprise Dacres on his return, then they must prepare to survive the intervening days.

Sobered, under Strike’s leadership, they began to assess their situation.

Outside, the terrain of Triton was bleakly unrelieved in the dim light, seemingly of volcanic origin. There was an occasional tree, squat and massive and spiny. Hoar frost coated the hollows, and a gusty wind whistled thinly.

With quiet efficiency, the men went about their duties, thrusting delicate instruments through the special values, testing temperature, pressure, analyzing the atmosphere. Strike took one look at the thermometer and shivered.

“I don’t believe it,” he declared.

“Oxygen out there, all right,” Kranz, working with the air sample, announced with satisfaction. “Trace of hydrogen. Trace of water vapor.” Then after an interval, “Oh-oh. Chlorine, too. Not much, though. Be easy to adjust the filters on our pressure suits to take care of it . . . Couple of inert gases, nothing harmful.” He looked up.

Gerry and Strike traded glances.

“Good as could be expected,” Strike said. “Naturally the gravity would hold a substantial atmospheric envelope. Shall we stroll about the yard and meet the neighbors?”

They drew lots for the six space-suits, and presently the winners poured out upon the surface of Triton like school children at recess. McCray and Kranz promptly staggered tipsily and fell down. Strike and the other men lurched and scrambled and finally remained upright in very weird positions, as if leaning against a gale. They all looked about in amazed bewilderment except Gerry, who was convulsed in unseemly merriment.

Strike inspected the landscape, which was apparently quite flat, then tried to understand why everyone acted as if standing on a hillside. He borrowed an apt phrase from McCray’s vocabulary.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

“Another item I forgot to mention,” Gerry explained. “One of Triton’s more amusing properties. ‘Down’ is not perpendicular to the ground, except at the poles and the equator! Evidently, you didn’t land quite at the equator, though you came close enough. The phenomenon isn’t so noticeable in the lifeboat because it’s already lying at an angle. Incidentally, a trip from the poles to the equator would be downhill all the way!”

“Aren’t you the cute one, though,” Strike growled.

He thought about this strange state of affairs, and had an awful vision of Triton slowly breaking up, with everything rolling down from its two poles till there was nothing left but an equator, spinning solemnly through the heavens like a runaway wheel.

To rid himself of this nightmare, he became very businesslike, dividing the castaways into groups for a general stocktaking. Exploration of the immediate vicinity was not encouraging. There was very little surface moisture, and drilling for water was of course out of the question. A kettle of melted frost, painfully gathered, proved potable, after boiling had driven off the chlorine.

The air was breathable through filter-masks, though cold as a knife-blade in the lungs. McCray, excited as a boy over the new experiences, tried

spitting, and was delighted to find the result turned to icicles before reaching the ground. He abandoned his fun, however, when his lips froze together painfully.

Food, either animal or vegetable, there seemed to be none. This worried Strike.

“There’s a lockerful of concentrates,” he said, “but they won’t last nine of us too long. We can only hope friend Dacres doesn’t wait too long before returning to check on us.”

His voice trailed off as he saw Gerry staring wide-eyed past him. He turned. Thirty yards away, something new had been added to the landscape—a five-foot high Thing covered completely with dark, coarse hair, tapering to a blunt point from a broad base. It somewhat resembled a black, furry bishop, strayed from a gigantic chessboard. The Thing stood utterly motionless in the grayness, as they watched. Though apparently without features, it somehow gave the feeling of watching them in intense curiosity.

“Pretend not to look at it,” Gerry suggested finally.

At once, the weird-looking intruder glided swiftly forward to within twenty yards, then froze stiffly again in its watchful attitude. McCray’s eyes were popping. He hadn’t the background to take this experience in stride.

“What is it?” he croaked. “Vegetable or mineral? D’ja see how it sort o’ glides along, sneakin’ up on us? No feet! How does it work?”

“What a beautiful specimen!” Gerry sighed with professional longing. “I really think it wants to make friends. Doesn’t it remind you of an oversize Scotty pup sitting up to beg?”

Strike snorted.

“What an imagination! Looks more to me like—”

“Watch it!” came the sudden warning.

In the discussion, they had taken their eyes from the newcomer, and it had seized the opportunity to move in. The center of its head opened to reveal an enormous mouth, filled with hideous, slavering, black fangs. Emitting an eerie whistling note, the Thing rushed savagely upon the group, in a horridly blind fury.

Everyone scattered like flushed quail, and the hairy enemy, unable to make quick turns, charged harmlessly through like a bull. Abandoning all pretense, it turned and came sliding back in another silent, deadly rush. Again, the castaways dodged aside.

“He has such an endearing way of showing his friendliness!” Strike gibed at his fiancée.

But though there were elements of humor in being chased round and round the space boat, tiring muscles soon warned that the situation was no joke.

“This can’t go on indefinitely,” Gerry finally gasped. “Someone’ll slip, or dodge a little too late. And if we retreat into the ship, it’ll just mean a siege. If that blasted Dacres had only left us a weapon—”

She might have been a lady Aladdin, speaking the magic formula, for the lifeboat opened and Barrows, grinning uncertainly, tossed an impoverished contraption to Strike. It consisted of two scalpels, fastened with wires from the control panel to a three-foot metal piece of weather-stripping ripped from the doorsill, to form a spear.

“Best we could do on short notice,” Barrows apologized, then retreated precipitately, as the shaggy, faceless nemesis charged raveningly against the closing port.

As the Thing reeled back from the shock, Strike deftly moved in with his crude weapon, slashing for the abdomen. The result was so completely devastating that Strike was dumbfounded.

The razor-sharp little knives went in as if through butter, and when they were withdrawn, a torrent of grayish fluid spouted forth almost endlessly, as if the strange creature were filled with the stuff to the exclusion of any kind of organs.

Eventually, the rank flood ceased, and the enemy collapsed like an empty glove, dead. The victory was so absolute—the weird animal had been so utterly ferocious, animated solely by the two emotions of cunning and hate. It had been defeated so easily—that bewilderment took the place of triumph. Everyone gathered round Strike and his trophy.

“Funny stuff,” Kranz said, pointing to the great puddle of vital fluid, as yet unaffected by the temperature. “Wonder what it is?”

“Must be anti-freeze,” Gerry hazarded.

“Be interesting to examine the beast,” Strike said slowly.

He and Kranz exchanged a long look and, by common consent, seized the shrunken carcass and bore it into the lifeboat. They could rig up a rough laboratory there, putter around for hours with the smelly corpse, and be quite happy.

Kranz was a fiend for chemical analysis. He would sample the Styx as Charon rowed him across. Gerry, whose interest in strange creatures was confined to live ones with commercial value, shrugged it off. It was one of the few times in her life she missed the point.

Seven times, Neptune's pale bulk popped over the horizon to make its swift journey across the sky before Strike, smiling like a cat in a bird-cage, invited Gerry into the lifeboat.

"Interesting beastie," he observed. "Skin as thin as paper, despite the shaggy coat. No circulatory system. Somehow that mess of fluid takes the place of blood—has corpuscles and things in it, too. Rudimentary organs of some kind about where you'd expect to find eyes. In the absence of a Latin scholar, we've named it *Apod Shaggius*—footless and hairy. 'Shaggie' for short."

"That hardly accounts for the self-satisfied smile," Gerry said shrewdly.

Strike grinned wider.

"We analyzed the fluid," he said. "It's a chlorinated compound, as you might expect—basically perchlorethylene."

"And so?"

"Kranz thinks it would be easy to convert the stuff, right inside the creature's body, into hexachlorethane, without any immediate harm. Just a few injections."

"Now there's a brilliant experiment!" Gerry simmered exasperatedly. "And at a time like this, marooned at the outer extremities of the System, our days numbered! Why, for heaven's sake?"

She still did not see the point, nor did any of the others except Kranz, and Strike found perverse delight in that fact. Gerry had kept still about Triton's peculiar balance of centrifugal and gravitational forces while she wasn't sure.

He, too, would have his little mystery till he knew whether his experiment was going to pan out.

The fact was, within a few hours, or days, Dacres would be returning to see if his murder plot had worked, and to set the stage for the rescue parties. The castaways would have one chance—and one only—to fight for their lives. It had to be good. And anything, however unlikely, that might give them an edge was well worth the effort.

"Never mind why," Strike urged. "Just be a good gal and help me out. All we need is one of these Shaggies captured alive to work on. You can do it. There's chloroform in the medical kit, and a rope that'd make a fine lasso. And, anyhow, surely one little old monster couldn't faze the inimitable Gerry Carlyle!"

Gerry choked back some very unladylike words.

Came the day when Tommy Strike's stomach had butterflies in it. That was not from hunger, although rations hadn't been generous. It was the sensation that every fighter knows as the ring lights go on, and the house darkens, and he awaits the bell for the first round.

They were all awaiting the bell now, tense and drawn-faced, as they hid in the darkened lifeboat, ready for a bigger, more desperate fight than any their prizefight pal, Kid McCray, had ever engaged in. Days of anxious waiting were over. Miles above the tricky Neptunian satellite, hovered *The Ark*, slowly descending, quartering in geometric pattern, as the detectors sought the smaller craft.

Were they ready for battle? Strike wondered. Some crude knives and knuckle-dusters had been made, and there had been some excitement when they captured one of the weird-looking hairy creatures they called Shaggies. Strike's enthusiasm for the experiment he and Kranz had performed on the beast had waned.

It was admittedly a longshot, though even if it didn't succeed, they would be no worse off than before. What it all boiled down to was an ambush. Dacres and his mob would be expecting to find nine corpses, the result of the murderous gravity. He was due for a shock.

It would be attacking proton-pistol-armed killers almost barehanded, but they had the advantage of stunning surprise. And the captured Shaggie just might help. It had been "doped up," as McCray expressed it, and turned loose when *The Ark* had finally come into sight. Now it stood out there, a blot on the landscape, surely one of Nature's mistakes.

Of course, the creature would inevitably attack any moving thing, including unwary pirates, with vigor. But whether subsequent events would conform with theory, was in the lap of the gods. And to them, Strike, in the intensity of his desire to rectify what he felt to be his fault, prayed fervently.

At length the time for wondering was over, for Dacres had finally located the wreck and was bringing *The Ark* down in a swift plunge, to hover lightly a few feet above the surface, balloon-like.

"They sure handle it sweet," someone muttered grudgingly.

"They ought to. They've had plenty of time to practise." That was Baumstark.

"S-sh! They might hear us!"

Minutes ticked away, as the gangsters in *The Ark* made their routine tests. Then the ship came to rest, the main port slid open, and the entire vicious mob stood in the big lock staring eagerly out. All wore gravity clogs.

Strike recognized Dacres at once, taller than the others, and anger began to seethe in his brain like an acid bath, ran like liquor through his veins. He felt his companions stir in the grip of that emotion, as they peered through pin-point peepholes. He could literally smell the hate as it sweated out of their trembling bodies.

“Not yet. Not yet,” Strike whispered restrainingly. “Watch.”

It was an ancient movie—jerky action, but no accompanying sound. Outside, the Shaggie was going through its familiar routine, sliding closer and closer, as it believed itself unobserved, to the men in the lock entrance, amazingly like an enormous friendly puppy, afraid of a kick, but hoping for a bone.

One of the gangsters, completely taken in, snapped his fingers at the creature invitingly. Then, inevitably following its fixed emotion-habit pattern, the Shaggie plunged viciously into action. Its initial rush carried it right into the air-lock.

A fearful tangle ensued.

Mouths popped open in soundless cries. Faces grimaced in sudden terror. Dodging madly about, the men fought to retreat into the main corridor of *The Ark*.

The Shaggie’s second blind, slaving rush took it right along with them, and someone went down. There was a nasty moment before a proton bolt blasted the Shaggie quite literally to bits, flooding the passageway with its evil-smelling, vital fluid.

“This is it!”

Strike’s voice was suddenly sharp and triumphant. A spate of grimly vengeful men, with Kid McCray in the lead, poured from the lifeboat and ran toward *The Ark*. Finely trained fighting men that they were, they didn’t even pause at the astounding sight that met their eyes. From out of *The Ark*’s open port came billow after billow of dense white smoke. It was as if the entire ship’s interior had suddenly begun to burn.

As the crew dashed across the short intervening space—they had left off their pressure suits for sake of freedom of action—Strike breathlessly explained in triumph:

“The smoke’s harmless! Don’t be afraid! Hexachlorethane in the Shaggie reacts vigorously with metallic zinc in the zinal floor and forms zinc chloride. Reaction liberates such great heat that the zinc chloride is immediately evaporated, and a dense cloud o’ white smoke is generated!”

As Strike fought for breath, he saw the man called Monk stagger out of the blinding smoke into view, squarely in the path of the charging McCray.

Without even slowing, McCray let drive with a frightful blow, a concentrate of days of fear and hunger and hate.

The blow caught the man squarely in the pit of the stomach, and through a momentary thinning of the smoke, the astonished castaways saw Monk go sailing clear through the air-lock and across the corridor to smash sickeningly against the far wall.

The truth dawned instantly. The piratical gang had adjusted their clogs to handle two-and-a-half Gs. Consequently, they were only flyweights now, not having had time to discover the facts of the gravitational situation.

With a howl of pure joy, Strike plowed after McCray into the wild melee that surged savagely through the white murk, throwing haymakers at everything in reach. If he hit someone who was solid, he muttered apologies and sought a new target. If his victim vanished from sight in the smoke from a single punch, he eagerly followed it up.

The end of the battle was a foregone conclusion. Completely surprised and disorganized, Dacres and his gang were overwhelmed. Only half realizing they were being attacked by men supposedly flat, frozen corpses, and not daring to use their guns for fear of hitting their own comrades, they were scattered, beaten senseless, and disarmed in three incredible minutes of fighting against phantoms.

Only two escaped that first onslaught. They fled down *The Ark's* endless corridors, firing around corners in a deadly, snipping rear guard action at their relentless pursuers. Strike, with the aid of captured weapons, quickly laid out a foolproof campaign against the two remaining pirates.

The pirates were driven to the ship's stern by constant threat of being outflanked, as the crew of *The Ark* infiltrated through dark side passages and storerooms. Then, with the arsenal room in his hands, Strike ordered anesthetic bombs broken in the ship's ventilating system. Everyone donned masks. Presently, the two diehards were captured as they slept soundly, faces flushed, in the galley.

The battle was over. Gerry, who had stood apart from actual combat by Strike's insistence, rewarded the valiant victors with a kiss for each.

Tommy Strike, during his tumultuous career with his world-famous fiancée, had known some wild celebrations. But he had never witnessed anything like the welcome that awaited them this time.

At a brief stopover on Mars for fresh food, Gerry had broken the whole fantastic story, which had promptly been forwarded by ether-beam to Earth in complete detail—the treacherous attempt of pirates to seize *The Ark* and murder its crew, the marooning, the outwitting of certain death, the strange

flight, and finally the return of Gerry Carlyle, bringing the criminals back alive.

For the last leg of Mars-Earth run, they had an escort of police craft, and in mid-space, an armed guard was put aboard. Privately, the crew considered this very unnecessary, but Gerry permitted it only as part of a hard bargain she characteristically drove—an understanding that before Dacres was indicted, she would have first crack at his bank account to pay for the trip to Triton, exactly as contracted for.

And now the home space-port was in truth a sea of humanity, frothing with white, as thousands of faces turned upward to watch the descent. There were cheers, and speeches, and officials, and photographers, and tele-newscasters.

Autograph-hunters broke through the police lines time and again. There was a nasty few minutes as Dacres and his band were hustled through the crowd to the police 'copters. And during it all, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike remained smiling, gracious and friendly.

Finally as the celebrants began to drift away, one of the reporters spotted McCray standing patiently in *The Ark's* air-lock. Instantly, climax piled upon climax, as the man shouted:

“Hey, look! It's Kid McCray! It's the missing Martian middleweight champ!”

Back came the crowds, the cameramen, the broadcasters. The crew of *The Ark* turned to McCray with jaws ludicrously agape. “You mean you really *are* a boxing champion?” Gerry cried.

McCray grinned self-consciously.

“I tried to tell ya. Nobody wouldn't believe me, that's all.”

“Well, I'll be—!” Gerry swore a ladylike oath, to the broadcasters' confusion, and the delight of everyone else.

Then a hundred questions showered on the little group, and bit by bit the amazing story behind McCray's presence on *The Ark* came out.

Darkness was approaching when the spectators, surfeited with the excitement and surprises of the afternoon, at last gave the weary wanderers rest.

Comparatively alone at last, *The Ark's* crew grinned feebly at one another. Tommy Strike had been very thoughtful since McCray's identity was established. Now he tried to move unobtrusively away. Too late. The erstwhile, pushed-around menial placed a firm hand on the captain's arm.

“Uh, look, Mr. Strike. There’s sump’in I just gotta do. I only dropped the duke a few times in my life, an’ every time I come back to reverse the decision. Even with Dacres an’ Monk, I squared things. So you’re the only fellow in the world to stop me—remember that first day in the pilot room?—who I ain’t got even with. Doncha see? I’m the champ. I just *have* to reverse that decision.” His eyes pleaded for understanding.

Strike nodded resignedly.

“Matter of principle, I suppose?”

“Sure.” McCray nodded eagerly. “It won’t take long. Just one knockdown, strictly friendly. You won’t hardly feel it, Mr. Strike.”

“Okay.” Strike’s fists came up, and they squared off.

McCray bobbed and weaved, bored in after the retreating Strike—and suddenly the pugilist’s feet slid into a weird tangle and he sat down hard. He leaned forward to clutch his ankle and howled in anguish.

Strike, who hadn’t landed a blow, and the amazed spectators gathered around. McCray’s ankle was visibly swelling—a bad sprain. The bout was over. “What on earth happened?” Strike inquired.

McCray gave up groaning a moment, pointed to the moist, bruised peel of a Martian banana, then looked around accusingly for a culprit to blame. His glance stopped on Gerry Carlyle, whose cheeks were bulging as she chewed heroically. She gulped it down.

Breathless, she raised her fiancé’s arm.

“The winnah,” she cried, “and still champeen—Tommy Strike!”

Hand in hand, they ran laughing away into the darkness, while Kid McCray beat the tarmac in futile exasperation.

“Aw, wait a minute,” he wailed. “You just can’t do this to me!”



SHAGGIE
(Apod Shaggius) (Native to Triton)

About five feet high completely covered with dark, coarse hair, tapering to a blunt point from a broad base. It resembles a bishop, from a gigantic chessboard. Its skin is paper thin and it is filled with a fluid that takes the place of blood. It has no circulatory system. It has rudimentary organs of sight. The fluid is a chlorinated compound basically, perchlorethylene. The center of the head contains an enormous mouth filled with black fangs. It emits an eerie whistling sound when annoyed. However it has not been determined whether this is a form of communication or not.

ROTIFER (Commonly called the Venusian Buzzard)

A round gray ball-shaped animal covered with dozens of stout cilia which propel it along at a rapid pace. The half-hidden mouth takes in everything it contacts. It is the scavenger of Venus.



GORA (Native to Titan)

A semi-intelligent creature. It stands about three feet high and in appearance is much like the Terrestrial seahorse. It has a scaly body at the base of which are four legs ending in hoofs. From its mouth protrudes a long thin extension which is retractable and is used for feeding. The Gora lives underground.



BLUE PLATE SPECIAL PLANT

This plant is one of the delicacies of Saturn, its leaves make a tasty salad when mixed with its fruit and a delicious drink may be distilled from its sap and its pinkish blossoms make a fragrant spice. This is a must for any Gourmet.



HYCLOPS
(Common) (Native to Ganymede)

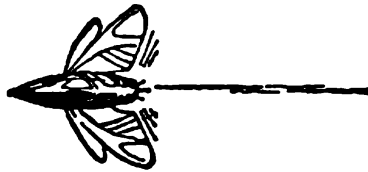
The Hyclops stands more than twelve feet high; he is completely covered with hair and boasts of four arms. It has three, one-eyed

heads, each with long fangs that protrude from a slobbering, loose-lipped mouth.



PROTEAN

The Proteans are an intelligent race that lives on Almussen's Comet. They are shaped like spheres and communicate by thought-images projected on their outer membrane. They are colored either red or blue. When first encountered there were only seven alive. One volunteered to come to Earth and can now be seen at the London Interplanetary Zoo. The remaining six stayed on Almussen's Comet which may never return to our System again. Thus the Protean now on Earth is the only example of life from another system than ours.



WHIZ-BANG BEETLE

The tiny armored and winged beetles of Venus are tremendously fast and disregard any object in their path. They are particularly attracted to the odor of tobacco smoke and many a hunter has been killed by smoking outdoors.

ALMUSSEN'S 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 telescope's beryllium steel.

Gerry was mad—She had flown into a fury to keep from crying. As Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle, the Solar System's greatest explorer, dared never in her own estimation, be 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, 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 girl 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 flopped 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 life-forms existing in much less probable conditions,” the girl 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.

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 girl 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 take-off. 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. Was it—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 Film, Incorporated. The biggest bunch of crooked fakers in the System. They duplicate the life-forms 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 shrieked. “Corny, you mean. You can’t duplicate life-forms 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 life-forms 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 life-form 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 take-off," 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 yelled. “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 gruded. “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 doubletakes, 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 girl who can catch what’s there. You bring back two of each life-form 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,” Van 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 girl 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.” Van 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 girl?” Von Zorn taunted.

Quade smiled unpleasantly. “Afraid? Nope. I’m going to show Catch-’em-Alive Carlyle just what double-crossing 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.

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 girl’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 ultra-violet, 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 oversized gadget composed chiefly of revolving mirrors and vari-colored 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 girl 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 girl 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 girl said disconsolately. “Wish I had on a dress—organdy—blue.”

By which it appears that Catch-’em-Alive 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 armour 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 take-off 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, squatly 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 Van Zorn could provide. At the last moment there had been a fanfare of publicity. A tremendous crowd was present to see the take-off.

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.

A flare of rockets thundered up, music boomed out, and the Silver Space Suit quartet began to chant the *Spaceman’s Song*. Anti-gravity 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 broncho. 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 visiplat 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 hulking, 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 armour 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 feminine weakness, perhaps even hysterics. The girl’s lips tightened.

“Right,” she said succinctly. “Scram, boys.”

Quade and Strike went out. Gerry turned to the controls. Her gaze went to the visiplat, 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 air-locks. 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 air-lock, 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' gravity-units, 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 might 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 girl 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 girl 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 shrilly.

“Quade! We’re in the coma—”

“Hold it, kid,” said a low voice behind her. The girl 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!”

The girl obeyed. She knew that not even the ship’s armor could entirely withstand the terrific bombardment of radio-activity. Too much of it would short-circuit a brain, unless protected by a helmet such as Gerry was hastily putting on.

Usually a spaceship 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 spacecraft 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 visiplat 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 life-form can live in cyanogen?”

“Why not cyanogen instead of oxygen? I can’t guess what the life-forms 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 girl wandered about for a time, resentment mounting within her.

At last she decided to take matters into her own small but capable hands. After all, she wasn’t merely the super-cargo.

She donned a space suit, pocketed a gas-gun and an explosive-projectile pistol, and let herself into a space-look. 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 girl 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-'em-Alive 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 shadowless 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 life-forms. But a glance at her weapons reassured the girl. 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 girl 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. Anaesthetic 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 girl 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 girl'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!

Gerry wasn't missed from the ship immediately. There was too much to be done. Not even Tommy Strike noticed that the girl 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 life-forms 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 air-tight. 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 take-off. 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 spaceship. 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 spaceship. 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 kangaroolike 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 life-form 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 life-forms.

“Originally the Arhennius 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 life-form. 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 up eternally. The interior of the tower was hollow. But far above, Quade caught the gleam of metal.

“Machines up there—”

He was interrupted by a cry from Strike.

“Gerry!”

The girl lay across the vast room, stretched unconscious on the floor.

Strike raced toward her, the others not far behind. He knelt beside the girl, 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?”

“We’re 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 girl’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 girl 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.

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 corporate 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! 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 girl 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 girl 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 store-houses of dreams. And the Proteans can materialize dreams!”

“Lord, oh Lord,” Quade groaned. “What a mess. This is just about the damndest 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 girl 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 hysterically. "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," the girl 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 mind 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 girl 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 wakening—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.”

Gerry adjusted her red hair and began to do things with a lipstick.

“Cyanogen. 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’d have to be portable. Um-m. . . .” He reached for a pad and pencil and made hasty notations.

“(CN)₂ plus O₂→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→ammonium oxalate.”

“Water?” Quade asked.

“Cyanogen plus water in the form of a simple spray would form ammonium oxalate. That salt isn’t a 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.

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 water-tank, 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. The girl knew 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, gaping 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 it was Gerry's 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-'em-Alive Carlyle against her enemies.

Quade's thoughts were rather similar, though less emotional. 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 ebony 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 behind him. After her came the men, bizarre figures with the big water-tank 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 . . .

Quade strode confidently toward the massed ranks. He walked into a gap between two of the monsters. And they gave way.

They drew back, puzzled!

Hesitation would have been fatal. 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. 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. He could not see Tommy Strike or the others.

Another path of Proteans opened across the floor of the tower chamber. Through that Quade advanced, in grim, deadly silence.

Forward he went, till he reached the center. There he paused.

At his feet lay five motionless figures, Earthmen all, unconscious and silent in their space suits and helmets. In a single glance, Quade 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 girl 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 girl 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 girl’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 girl 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 air-lock 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 air-tight 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 to 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 spaceship 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!

Exactly one month later, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike were sitting in the girl'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 girl 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 double-crossing 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 girl 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 girl 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?”

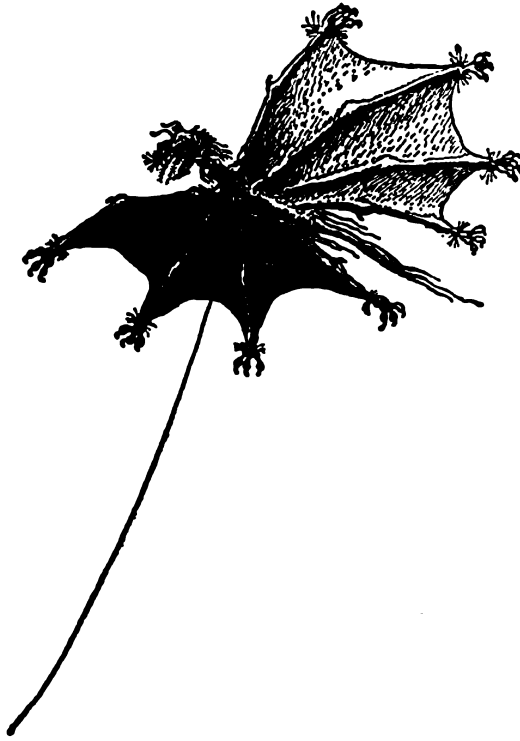
The words were unfortunate. Gerry seemed to regain her usual spirits. Her voice crackled like an electronic bombardment.

“Yes, indeed,” she remarked coldly. “Just who were you dreaming about on that comet?”

Strike released the girl 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-’em-Alive” Gerry Carlyle scampered frantically after him.



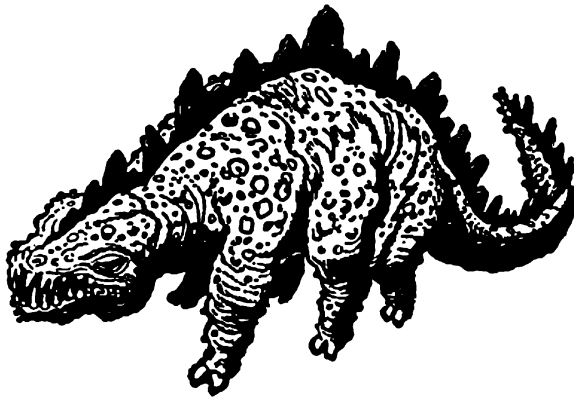
SATURNIAN KITE

An eight-legged creature with folds of membrane between its limbs. It spins a fine filament thinner than piano wire but much stronger. The creature is insectivorous. During each of the periodical windstorms of Saturn it allows itself to be swooped into the air, maintaining contact with the ground by spinning its lengthy filament. One end of the thread is firmly attached to a rock by some organic adhesive manufactured within its glands. In the teeth of the storm, it spreads itself wide simulating a parachute net, to trap the millions of insects being tossed about by the wind.



ROTARY MOLE (Native to Titan)

About the size of a woodchuck but quite round. Its mouth is set precisely in the center of its head, perfectly circular and is armed with a formidable set of teeth. Two tiny eyes are set in furry sockets. It has a number of little flippers set haphazardly all over its body. These lie flat when the Mole is not in motion. They help spin it in a clockwise motion while its teeth chew away at rock and it bores into the ground at an amazing speed.



DERMAPHOS

A ten-foot crested lizard with a thick warty hide. It has six feet and each foot two toes. Sharp teeth in front and grinders in the rear. Four of its teeth are backed by glands which secrete a powerful acid. Like all cold-blooded creatures it moves very slowly. An interesting facet of the Dermaphos is that it eats uranium. As a result it glows under UV light.

SATURN

The conference taking place in the New York offices of the London Interplanetary Zoo, on the top floor of the tremendous Walker Building, was not going well. The suite was built of the finest modern materials and equipped with all the comforts science could devise. Vacuum-brik walls shut out noise. There were mineral fluff insulation, Martian sound-absorbent rugs, plastic body-contour furniture, air conditioning. The press of a button brought iced drinks or lighted cigarettes of aromatic Venusian tobaccos through a recess in one wall.

Despite all these comforts, the visitor was having a bad time.

At one end of the room was a small screen. On a stand before it was the morning “newspaper,” consisting of a tiny roll of film. Subscribers could turn on the latest news at any time by simply flashing it onto the screen. A dial enabled the reader to flip through the entire “paper” with a twist or two. Vari-colored backgrounds—white for local news, green for foreign, yellow for sports, and so on—making it easy for the reader to turn to any desired section.

Right now it was turned to the pale violet interplanetary page.

GERRY CARLYLE CHALLENGED IN RACE TO SATURN

London Zoo Contract at Stake as Prize for Victor

N.Y. Sept. 4.—UP—Scientific circles stirred with interest today as the supremacy of Gerry “Catch-’em-Alive” Carlyle in the role of interplanetary trapper—the rigorous profession of capturing monstrous life-forms on our neighboring planets and returning with them alive for exhibition in Earthly zoos—was challenged by Prof. Erasmus Kurtt.

Miss Carlyle’s contract with the London Interplanetary Zoo comes up for renewal soon. Prof. Kurtt suggested that so important a position should be given only to the one most fitted to hold it.

Intimating that he considered himself the better “man,” Kurtt proposed a race with the rich L.I.Z. contract as the prize.

The contest would be decided on the basis of a journey to any designated planet, the capture of any designated monster thereon, and safe return to Earth under the racer’s own power. First home with the creature alive and well would be declared the winner.

Prof. Kurtt suggested that the planet Saturn would afford sufficient difficulties to test the mettle of the contestants.

Speculation was rife . . .

The news item was switched off sharply, coincident with a sound, suspiciously like a feminine snort. Claude Weatherby, public relations director for the London Interplanetary Zoo, mopped his brow furtively. He felt that he would rather contend with the tantrums of any of the world’s greatest collection of planetary monstrosities than with Gerry Carlyle’s famous temperament.

Gerry was in an uncompromising mood. It was apparent in the set of her shoulders, the swing of her arms as she paced the office floor.

Visibly drawing upon his nerve, Weatherby tentatively resumed an argument.

“After all, my dear, it’s only a publicity stunt. We appreciate that you are the outstanding personage in the business. Please be assured of that. We would never have consented to the race if we hadn’t had absolute faith in your ability to defeat this fellow Kurtt.”

“I understand all that,” Gerry said coldly.

“Perhaps we should have consulted you before barging ahead with plans for a send-off ceremony with you and Kurtt. But, really, we were confident that your famous sportsmanship—”

“Spare me the crude flattery, Claude. You haven’t told me all the circumstances surrounding this silly challenge. I like honesty. I make a point of being straightforward. Why don’t you?”

Weatherby crimsoned and began to sputter. Gerry stopped him short with an imperious gesture.

“Here are the facts. The planetary hunters, of whom I am one, can be counted on your fingers. Another two or three, Claude, and you’d have to take off your shoes to count them. We form probably the most exclusive little coterie anywhere in the Solar System. The chance of anyone’s possessing all the qualifications to become a successful trapper of monsters is literally one in millions.

“Now this fellow Kurtt—he’s no more a professor than you are—is definitely not one of us. He’s a small-time hanger-on, chiseling a few dollars by talking some sucker into financing him for short trips. There are two unexplained things. In the first place, none of the genuine hunters would have the appalling lack of ethics to try snaffling a fellow-member’s job. It just isn’t done.

“A man like Kurtt wouldn’t dare suggest such a thing. He hasn’t the—er—courage. Unless, of course, someone important egged him on. And secondly, where on Earth would a phony like Kurtt get the financing? This is big business, Claude, as you well know. The returns of a successful trip of mine may run close to a million dollars a year for the L.I.Z. But it also costs hundreds of thousands to carry out an expedition.

“As for the race—against Hallek or Moore or one of the others it would be fun. But to associate with a man of Kurtt’s unsavory reputation is harmful to me and the Zoo. The whole thing—er—”

“It certainly doesn’t smell good,” interpolated a third voice.

Weatherby and the girl glanced at an easy chair in the corner. Barely visible were a pair of muscular, booted legs draped over the chair arm, and a cloud of pipe smoke. When it dissipated, the ruggedly good-looking face of Captain Tommy Strike, grinned sourly at them.

“Look, Claude,” he explained. “What Gerry is asking, in her quaint way, is who’s backing Kurtt?”

Weatherby hemmed and hawed, his British tact quite unequal to the task.

“Fact is—uh—we—ah—didn’t realize ourselves who was behind Kurtt till after we’d agreed on the—uh—bally publicity stunt. The man behind—”

His voice petered out entirely. Gerry Carlyle gazed with rising consternation at Weatherby.

“Claude!” she cried. “You don’t mean to say—It can’t possibly be that horror from Hollywood on the Moon. Not Von Zorn again!”

“Well—” Weatherby made a defeated gesture and hunched his shoulders like a man about to be overwhelmed by a storm.

Gerry groaned in mortal anguish. Of all people in the System to be in her hair again, Von Zorn, czar of the motion picture business, was positively the least welcome. The feud between these two for the past few years had raged from Mercury to Jupiter, with skirmishes on the Moon, Venus, Almussen’s Comet, and various wayside battlegrounds.

With Gerry, it was the matter of an ideal. She took it as a personal insult when Von Zorn’s clever young technicians synthesized, for motion picture

consumption, robot-controlled planetary monsters instead of using the real thing. She always loved to unload a roaring cargo of the genuine article just in time to show up the menace in Nine Planets Pictures' latest action epic as the wire and *papier mâché* creations they really were.

With Von Zorn, it was a matter of box office. There was no percentage in making high-budget films when Gerry was constantly turning them into low-gross productions by her genuine attractions at the L.I.Z.

By vigorously pacing across the room and back, Gerry tried to reduce her head of steam.

"So!" she finally burst out, and the syllable was like the bursting of an atomic bomb. "Old monkey-face hasn't had enough, eh? Still whetting his knife in case I turn my back. Thinks he'll run me out of business. Put one of his stooges in my place so he can dictate to the Zoo the way he dictates to those poor, deluded devils at Hollywood on the Moon!"

"Well," Gerry continued in a voice that can only be described as a cultured feminine snarl, "all right, I accept the challenge! And I can promise Kurtt and that sly simian, Von Zorn, a trouncing that they'll never forget!"

She strode to the visiphone, snapped the lever. The eyes of the switchboard girl in the outer office stared frightenedly from the screen. Obviously she had been listening in through the interoffice communicator. Just as obviously, she held her employer in awe.

"Get me Barrows!" commanded Gerry peremptorily. "Get me Kranz. Rout out that whole slovenly, craven crew of mine. Tell 'em we've got things to do and places to go, if they could possibly spare a little time from their carousing."

Gerry paused to smile. No one knew better than she that her crew was neither slovenly nor cowardly. They were picked men, culled from the thousands of hopeful adventurers from everywhere who constantly besieged her in their desire to join. They were intelligent, highly trained, vigorous, and loyal to their beloved leader. Several in the past had given their lives for her.

Though they sometimes played a game of grumbling about Gerry's iron-handed rule, they fiercely resented any outsider's intimation that her leadership was anything short of perfect. They lived dangerously, and severe discipline was the price of survival. They were envied by red-blooded men everywhere, and they were proud of it.

Gerry tossed her head confidently and smiled.

"I think Mister Kurtt won't find any such team as mine to go to bat for him. As for you, Claude"—she gazed at him as she might regard some

remarkable but slightly distasteful swamp-thing from Venus—"you may run along now. Whip up your excitement and publicity fanfares. Make ready for the colossal ceremony, the great race.

"You've inveigled me into this nonsense, and I'm agreeing only because it's a chance to hoist Von Zorn on his own petard. But it must be done on the grand scale, Claude. I want nothing petty."

Gerry walked to the passage that led to her private suite and exited with a faintly grandiose air. When angry, she had a tendency to dramatize her anger. Weatherby shut his gaping mouth. He seized his hat with the attitude of a man who has just been reprieved from the gas chamber.

"Y'know," he said bewilderedly to Strike, "she's quite a changeable woman. Sometimes I think she's a bit difficult to fathom."

Tommy smiled as he held the outer door for Weatherby. It was the understanding smile of one who has just listened to a masterpiece of understatement.

"Quite," he agreed. "Rah-ther!"

The start of the Kurtt-Carlyle race was spectacular enough to satisfy the wildest dreams of any publicity man. Staged at the Long Island space-port, it was carried out in the most hallowed traditions of such events.

The newscasters were there with their three-dimensional color cameras, picking up the ceremony for millions of listeners. Thousands of eager spectators thronged the many galleries of the port. To them, Gerry Carlyle was the epitome of all the heroines of history, to be adored for her beauty, her courage, her amazing exploits.

Weatherby, through the "papers," had given the affair a tremendous build-up. Notables, as advertised, spoke briefly. Among the foremost was Jan Hallek, the genial Dutch hunter whose fame was second only to Gerry's. He expressed the attitude of all the recognized men of the craft. Ostentatiously he wished Gerry the best of luck and was politely distant toward Professor Kurtt.

The mayor of Greater New York, currently a presidential candidate, dwelt at length upon Gerry's courage and farsightedness. Somehow he tied them up with the political party he represented.

The Governor of Idaho, the mayor's campaign manager, professed to see in Gerry's expeditionary force a perfect harmony between Capital and Labor. If his party was returned to power at the polls in November, he promised to bring about that ideal condition in the country.

Gerry and Tommy Strike viewed all this uproar somewhat cynically through the telecast set in *The Ark* itself. They were dog-tired. For one solid week, almost without rest, they had rushed through the tremendous task of outfitting the ship for an extended journey.

The mighty centrifuges were completely checked by expert mechanics, to be certain there would be no failure of motive power in mid-space. An endless stream of supplies—food, medicines, clothing, water, reading matter for the crew’s off-duty hours—poured in through the open ports. Weapons of all kinds were stowed away in the arsenal. Space suits and all emergency equipment had to be examined. Scientific instruments were taken aboard.

A course was charted by Lewis, Chief Astronaut, double-checked by Gerry herself. She and Tommy had to call on their last dregs of energy to push through their program to completion in time.

Now Tommy was slumping exhaustedly in an easy chair and puffing the ancient pipe with which he had saved Gerry’s life on Venus during that memorable occasion when she had determined to obtain the unobtainable *murri*. For sentimental reasons, he had refused to throw it away.

“It seems to me,” he grunted wearily, “that this fellow Kurtt is pretty thoroughly hated for a guy who isn’t doing much harm. Why not give him the benefit of the doubt?”

Gerry sniffed in disdain.

“Come to the starboard port and look at his ship.”

The Kurtt vessel lay in a starting cradle on the far side of the field, apart from the mob milling around the telecast ceremony. It was two-thirds the size of *The Ark*, plainly a refitted old-style rocket ship. One section, instead of being metal, was composed of glass to permit a spectator to see into the ship. The glass had a greenish tint, indicating a high iron content—the strongest type of glass to resist high pressures.

“See that?” Gerry demanded. “This Kurtt fake has made two or three short trips to the Moon, or maybe Mars. On the strength of that, he loads his ship with a conglomeration of sickly beasts from some broken-down zoo. Then he goes hedge-hopping about the country, making one-night stands, collecting nickels and dimes from the yokels. He’s just like an old-time medicine showman. He tries to sell copies of his ungrammatical book, which is a dreary account of what he thinks were dramatic incidents in his miserable existence.”

Tommy grinned. “I still think it must be that feminine intuition of yours working overtime. I gather you just don’t like the guy.”

“He’s an out-and-out fake. Are you defending him?”

Strike dodged the trap.

“Not me. If you and everybody think he’s a phony, that’s good enough for me. What worries me is that you’re liable to underestimate him. After all, he has plenty of money behind him now. See those rocket-tubes? They’re lined with the latest super-resistant materials. Which means our friend must have completely new atomic engines, using Uranium Two-thirty-five. That costs. And besides, he’s pretty confident, else he’d never have picked Saturn to race to.”

“The best rocket ship in the System can’t match *The Ark* for speed. I’ll bet we could cut his flying time in half if we had to.”

Gerry knew her ship and the almost unlimited power of centrifugal force it utilized. She had no fears for its superiority.

They were interrupted by a messenger who came running in excitedly. The climax of the grand shivaree outside had arrived and now the presence of Gerry Carlyle was expected. She sighed, made swift magic with a lipstick, smoothed her shining hair, glanced with poorly concealed satisfaction in a mirror. Then, with a wink at Strike, she hurried before him to the main port.

When Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike made their appearance, the cheering was tremendous and prolonged. Candid camera fiends clicked their shutters and fought for unusual angles. Autograph-hunters battled one another grimly for “Catch-’em-Alive” Carlyle’s signature. The inevitable college youth tried to handcuff himself to Gerry’s wrist in a futile effort to achieve fame. For Gerry Carlyle’s name was synonymous with glamor—more than the most highly paid star who ever acted for Nine Planets Pictures.

In a swift blitzkrieg, the pair smilingly thrust their way through to the battery of microphones. And there, for the first time, Strike met Professor Erasmus Kurtt. It was a shock.

Strike’s innate sense of fair play had him prepared to lean over backward to do the fellow justice. He had already felt sorry for him in view of his universal unpopularity. But Kurtt was indeed an unlovable person.

He was tall and rather lean, yet had a remarkably rounded little paunch. Hair thinning on top, displayed a scalp greasy from too much of some tonic. As he talked a single gold tooth gleamed rhythmically in the sun. He constantly hunched himself in an ingratiating gesture, while regaling bored reporters with his life story. Obviously he was excited at being in the spotlight. In short, he was the sort of character people always avoid for no particular reason, except complete disinterest.

“See what I mean?” whispered Gerry, as she advanced with a dazzling smile toward the mayor.

Strike nodded. He saw all right. Easy-going though he was, he felt he could really dislike Kurtt with no effort at all.

Tommy managed to efface himself in the front line of the crowd. This was Gerry’s show. He had no desire to intrude or make speeches or shake hands with anyone, and he watched with impersonal detachment as the two contestants were introduced for the benefit of the color cameras and televisors.

Gerry, in the name of sportsmanship, had to shake Kurtt’s clammy, fishlike paw. She listened patiently as pompous platitudes rolled off Kurtt’s tongue. He called her “charming little lady” and “my dear” and made patronizing reference to her achievements “in spite of the handicap of her sex.” Long after that, he concluded with pious hope that the best man might win.

Strike watched uneasily as the unmistakable signs of rising temper manifested themselves in Gerry’s demeanor. He shrank without cause. In the lull following perfunctory applause after Kurtt’s speech, Gerry’s clear voice rang out.

“Where’s Von Zorn?”

Kurtt’s smile was only a pathetic imitation.

“Er—I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t evade me, *Professor*.” She turned directly to the microphones. “Ladies and gentlemen, you are doubtless wondering who is really responsible for this race. There is only one man I know in the entire Solar System who has the shockingly bad taste to try to take my job. Von Zorn, the motion picture person, is backing the professor, hoping to run me out of business. Von Zorn isn’t here because he doesn’t have that kind of nerve. Or perhaps he realizes that he has overmatched himself again. Or—”

The horrified announcer quickly pushed himself into the scene that was being telecast to millions of delighted listeners. Making smooth small talk he deftly edged Gerry out of focus and sound before her tirade came to an end.

Strike shook his head. The combination of Gerry’s long-standing feud with Von Zorn and Kurtt’s unethical behavior had been too much. In spite of rigorous schooling, her famous temper still sometimes got out of hand. But now, of all times! Naturally everyone was rooting for her. Suppose though, after this scene which clearly indicated her contempt for her opponent, something should go wrong. What if Kurtt won? The humiliation, for a

proud girl like Gerry, would be unbearable. Yes, it might just be that this time the Carlyle luck was being pushed too far.

Strike began to have a nagging little premonition. More closely than ever, he watched the ceremony. Gerry, as had been agreed upon beforehand, was to make public her selection of the monster whose capture was necessary for victory. She named the dermaphos of Saturn, so-called because, according to Murray—the great pioneer explorer whose books were standard texts in every college—the dermaphos' hide glowed with a faint phosphorescence.

Kurtt, much to Strike's increasing uneasiness, was not in the least taken aback. Not much was known about the dermaphos, except from the writings of Murray and one or two other explorers. They described it as a relatively large creature and rather rare. Confident in the ability of her own crew to surmount any and all obstacles, Gerry had purposely chosen a beast that would be difficult to capture. But Kurtt was nodding and smiling, perfectly agreeable. His complete self-confidence gave Strike considerable to think about.

At last the ceremony came to an end. Police firmly herded the crowd off the tarmac, leaving it clear for the two ships to blast off. Strike, awaiting his fiancée at the main port of *The Ark*, was too disturbed even to scold for losing her temper at the microphone. Instead, he asked:

"Has it really occurred to you, kitten, just what's at stake in this silly race? You've deliberately selected a limb, sawed it half-through, and climbed out on it. If it breaks, after your interesting but impolite and boastful remarks, we're washed up. Completely. And Kurtt isn't acting like a man who's convinced he can't win."

Gerry smiled with complete aplomb.

"Masculine intuition, my love?" she taunted. "I know I acted like a cat just now, but I simply couldn't help it. Anyhow, I'll be a good girl and attend to business from now on. So you needn't worry about who's going to win this race. That, my brave worrier, is in the bag."

"I wonder," said Strike thoughtfully, as the rocket-tubes of Kurtt's ship began to rumble mightily.

The Inferno, as described by Dante, is an unpleasant place. But for sheer ugliness, inhospitality and danger, it fails to approach the planet Saturn. Twenty-one days in that dreary waste-land convinced Tommy Strike of Saturn's absolute hideousness.

There was one favorable aspect. The surface gravity of Saturn was not much different from that of Earth. All other aspects concerning that malodorous world afforded nothing but discomfort and peril to human beings. Of this Strike was positive as he gazed over the bleak landscape.

The surface of Saturn was rugged. Tremendous mountain ranges reared massively into the murky atmosphere, on a scale that would dwarf anything known on Earth. Most of their surfaces were frozen solid. That was not so much because of temperature—for internal heat made Saturn sufficiently warm to support life—but because of the great pressures created by Saturn's thousands of miles of atmosphere. This was proved by the occasional outcroppings of a blue-gray "rock," which were really solidified ammonia.

Clumping steps along the corridor of *The Ark* drew Strike's attention. It was Gerry, dressed in the special suit designed for use under such abnormal pressures. As an extra precaution, helium was used instead of nitrogen to prevent any possibility of the "bends."

"More observations?" inquired Tommy despairingly.

She smiled with gentle understanding.

"Yes, a few more. But our three weeks' work is showing splendid results. It won't be long now. I know it's boring, but you realize as well as I that we're up against a completely and unclassified unknown form of life. Most people, of course, think our job's done when we bag a specimen and get it into the ship. As a matter of fact, the hard part is yet to come. Catching 'em alive is much easier than *keeping* 'em alive and well."

"I know, I know." Strike knew the entire lecture by heart. "We must exactly duplicate in the hold of *The Ark* every feature of the animal's environment. As far as possible, we must learn of what it's composed, its habits, what it eats and drinks and breathes, and how much. Transporting a creature through millions of miles of free space into an alien environment is not a job for an amateur."

Gerry applauded clumsily with her bulky gauntlets.

"Bravo! Sometimes I really think you're learning something about this business. Coming along, my hero?"

Strike made a wry face, but obediently turned to the empty suit standing within the air-lock. Later, properly dressed, he stepped with Gerry to the hard-packed soil of Saturn's lowlands. The hour was mid-day, though here full daylight was only a weak solution of night.

Gerry squinted a weather-eye at the heavens, observed the turgidly boiling fragments of cloud masses whipping past. The daily windstorm, which broke regularly enough to set a clock by, was about over. Now its tag

ends were confined to the upper reaches. Common to all the larger planets, Saturn suffered tremendous gales of ammonia and methane raging above the main body of hydrogen-helium atmosphere.

The Ark was resting in the bottom of a moderate-sized valley, a landing place which had been chosen partly because it afforded shelter against the elements, but mostly because of a remarkable feature of Saturn's atmosphere.

There were still traces of oxygen on Saturn. Being heavier than the other gases on the planet, the oxygen had gathered in "pools" in the low spots. Since animal life was dependent upon oxygen even on that miserable world, the result was that small "islands" of life were distributed over Saturn existing only where sufficient oxygen remained. Naturally that helped Gerry's search considerably. *The Ark* simply hopped from valley to valley till they found a spot with one or more specimens of the dermaphos they were seeking.

After locating a colony, all their efforts had been devoted to the most thorough analysis of the animal's environment, to reproduce it perfectly within the space ship.

As Gerry and Strike walked ponderously along a familiar path, they encountered other members of the crew already at work. One party was busily engaged in digging vast amounts of Saturnian vegetation for transplanting inside *The Ark* to feed the dermaphos.

The plants were invariably low-growing vegetables, clinging close to the ground to prevent being uprooted by the terrible winds. Their leaves were thick, spatulate, like some of Earth's ornamental cacti, and dark in color. Others were shaped like tightly bunched artichokes, some like large, flat mushrooms. One type, the favorite of the dermaphos, resembled a belligerent cabbage.

As the two walked along, occasional gusts of wind sent a miniature hail of armored insect life rattling against their metallic suits. Once a blundering birdlike thing flapped heavily by, shrieking mournfully, "Meeee! Meeee!" It was the Screaming Meemie.

Farther on, Gerry paused before a small dense bush somewhat resembling the Terran carnauba palm tree, the seeds of which provide the Brazilian natives with coffee—while its sap is a reasonable substitute for cream.

The Saturnian plant went the carnauba one better, however. Its leaves made a tasty salad when mixed with its fruit, and a delicious drink could be distilled from its sap. To top it off, a fragrant spice might be shaken from its

pinkish blossoms. Hence its name—the Blue Plate Special plant. Gerry stripped the bush eagerly, dropping her prizes into a specimen bag.

Once Strike pointed out a splatter of sticky stuff clinging to a stone. Rising from this, clear out of sight into the low-flying scud, was a thin, silvery strand.

“Kite,” remarked Strike over the tiny portable two-way radio in his space suit.

Gerry nodded. The Saturnian kite was an eight-legged creature with folds of membrane between its limbs, much like those of the Terrestrial flying squirrel. It also spun a filament resembling a spider’s web, though its thread was infinitely more powerful. Thinner than piano wire, yet its tensile strength was almost twice the wire’s.

The creature was insectivorous. During each of the periodical winds, it allowed itself to be swooped into the air, maintaining contact with the ground by spinning its lengthy filament. One end of the thread was firmly attached to a rock by some organic adhesive manufactured within its glands. In the teeth of a gale, it spread itself wide imitating a parachute net, to trap the millions of insects being dashed about by the wind. At any time, the kite could descend by “reeling in” on the practically indestructible strand.

“I’m glad we managed to catch a couple of those things,” Gerry remarked. “I have an idea we might make a fortune from them.”

“No kidding! How? Sell ’em to little boys every March?”

“No, silly. Get a couple of those creatures to spin a few miles of that amazing filament, and you could weave a coat or any other garment that would never wear out. Just think what the cotton and wool and silk tycoons would pay us to keep that off the market!”

Strike disdained to reply. In a few moments they entered the area where they had located their dermaphos. The animal was apparently a rather rare specimen, yet once it had been located, it remained pretty well staked out. That was because it was an extremely sluggish creature, moving only short distances at any time.

Without much searching, the two hunters relocated their monster. Strike stood staring at it wryly.

“Not much of a beastie, is he?”

The dermaphos certainly was somewhat of a disappointment, being unmelodramatic in appearance. There was nothing exciting about it, like the Venusian whip, or the cacus of Satellite Five of Jupiter. Nor was there anything attractive about it, like the famous energy-eaters of Mercury.

It appeared to be merely a ten-foot, crested lizard with a thick, warty hide.

There were peculiarities, of course. Its six feet had only two toes apiece, indicating that evolution on Saturn had taken cognizance of the futility of scratching at that dense, rocky soil. More strangely, despite the pictures in Murray's tests which showed rows of phosphorescent lights like those that decorate deep-sea fishes, this dermaphos did not glow. For the most part, though, it was an ordinary creature, considering what important matters hinged upon its capture.

"Well, what's on the program today, kitten?" Strike wanted to know.

"A pound of flesh. Dr. Kelly is playing the role of Shylock, and would like a sample of our friend here for analysis. He's been working on the puzzle of why the dermaphos doesn't phos. So he's been taking pictures and all sorts of tests."

Strike considered. The dermaphos' hide was much too thick for any sort of injection of local anesthetics, though it could be gassed into temporary unconsciousness. But that would be the means to be used for the actual capture, and Gerry disliked to give her prospective victims any advance hint of what was in store for them. Some of the planetary life-forms were amazingly adaptable. After one shot of anesthetic, they could develop immunity to it.

"Big reptiles are always sluggish," said Tommy jauntily. "I'll bet I can whack off a piece before he even realizes what's happened."

He selected a hand-ax from the row of hooks round the outside of his suit. Confidently he stepped around behind the dermaphos as it browsed sleepily on the leathery foliage. Seizing the tip of the monster's tail, he smashed the ax down. Instantly he was flung off-balance by a ton of enraged flesh. He fell heavily, and the world spun with incredible speed.

When his eyes focused properly again, Strike found himself staring into the gaping jaws of the dermaphos. In his ears, the angry and frightened scream of his fiancée was ringing.

"Tommy! Tommy! Are you hurt? Don't move. I'm coming!"

Strike grinned shakily.

"Relax. Everything's under control, I think. He can't hurt me in this suit. Just get around behind him and warm his stern with a heat beam. And listen, Gerry, remember your credo—no unnecessary heroics. Stay well out of danger."

A faint sobbing breath in Strike's earphones was the only audible indication that the girl was anything but under iron-nerved control. For a

minute there was an armed truce, while the dermaphos tried to make a decision. Strike remained motionless. Ax in one hand and tail fragment in the other, he stared unblinkingly into the unquestionably lethal mouth of the ugly Saturnian monster.

Since he was involuntarily in a position to do so, he made observations. The beast had sharp teeth in front as well as grinders in the rear. That showed that he was probably omnivorous, though none of the hunting party had seen him eat anything but vegetation. Besides, at least four of the fangs appeared to be backed by glands of some sort. The acid secretion drooled slowly onto the breast of Strike's pressure suit, and it was so powerful that the metal became pitted.

Beyond the range of Strike's vision, Gerry went into action. The dermaphos squealed suddenly with rage and flipped its mighty bulk around to face a new tormentor.

Strike rolled wildly aside to avoid the thrashing monster. Even in that confused instant of activity, he got a glimpse of the raw spot on the dermaphos' tail where he had hacked off the living flesh. It was still smoking from Gerry's well aimed heat-ray blast, and Strike found time for swift sympathy. That must have stung the unhappy creature badly.

Then the brief drama was finished. Strike clambered to his feet and moved to safety on the far side of the clearing, while Gerry calmly lured away the slow-moving dermaphos.

Presently the two hunters joined forces again. Strike bowed clumsily and offered the bit of flesh from the animal.

"Compliments of the management," he said with an affected accent, "for mademoiselle."

Physical danger to either, though pretty much to be expected in their profession, was always harrowing to the other.

"It's times like these," Gerry said slowly, "when I think of chucking the whole thing."

"And settle down in a little gray penthouse in the west?"

They grinned at each other. Gerry could never of her own volition quit the rigorous, exciting game in which she was an acknowledged leader. It was in her blood like an incurable disease. She was the kind to die with her boots on, probably on some distant world where human feet had never trod before. Life, for her, consisted of boldly tackling murderous life-forms for the benefit of the millions of spectators who yearly thronged the London Interplanetary Zoo.

There was no other way of existence and they both knew it.

Shrugging off the momentary reaction, Strike and Gerry made their way slowly bade to *The Ark*. Dr. Kelly, the red-headed Irish biologist with a Harvard accent, met them as they stepped inside the air-lock. Excited, he seized the piece of the dermaphos. With a brief apology, he rushed off to his little laboratory. Gerry looked after the scientist in wonder.

“Seems to be in a terrible rush,” she observed.

She learned the reason shortly. Turning toward the control room, she and Strike came across Lieutenant Barrows, whose young face was frowning. He gasped with relief when his superiors arrived.

“Oh, Miss Carlyle!” he blurted. “Something unexpected has turned up. Professor Kurtt visited us today!”

“Kurtt, here? That’s impossible! Saturn’s thirty-two thousand miles in diameter. He couldn’t just drop in on us like a bill collector!”

Once again Strike felt that familiar prickle of apprehension whenever he thought or heard of Kurtt. The fake professor looked like a harmless bore to the naked eye, but close inspection revealed his deadly qualities. Tommy had learned never to underestimate an opponent, and he recognized the man’s cool, quiet shrewdness. And this latest move made him feel more uneasy than ever.

“I dare say,” he pointed out, “that it was no great trick to find us. Saturn seems to be poor in any sizable metallic deposits, so a good detector would record the presence of *The Ark* promptly. No, that isn’t what worries me. It’s why he came.”

Barrows said that practically half the crew were away from the ship, doing scheduled tasks. The remainder, the scientists, were in their labs.

“When I stepped out of the control room,” he continued, “I found Kurtt and four of his crew strolling along the main corridor as if they owned the place. He apologized for walking in, but said no one answered his hails. He tried to pump me about our progress, but he got mighty little out of me.” Barrows looked faintly complacent.

“Is he gone now?” Gerry snapped.

“Oh, yes, Miss—”

“Crew know about Kurtt coming here?”

“Those in the ship heard him talking with me as I tried to maneuver him outside without a fuss. Dr. Kelly knows, and Dr.—”

“Did Kurtt let anything slip about what he’s been doing since arriving on Saturn?”

“Well, I thought he seemed a little worried. I don’t really believe he’s located a dermaphos yet, Miss Car—”

“Okay. We pulled a boner by not setting a guard. But it’s obvious that Kurtt came nosing around to see if we’d found a dermaphos yet, and, if so, to try stealing it off right from under our noses.”

She took a deep breath and began to give her orders to the now thoroughly alarmed Barrows.

“Call in all the crew. Everyone. As soon as they get here, tell Kranz to take five men with him, and a full complement of weapons and gravity plates. Have Kranz stake himself out by our dermaphos, but make no move till I contact him by radio. Just watch, and protect our property in case Kurtt should try to hijack it. On your toes, now. Snap to it!”

Hardly missing a beat in her machine-gun firing of orders, Gerry whisked into the control room and switched on the intership communicator.

“You researchers, attention! Bring your reports to the control room at once. We’re leaving shortly, if it’s at all possible.”

Before actually catching any alien monster, Gerry always had her scientific staff learn every possible item concerning the beast. Then the data was thoroughly gone over in a general meeting. If they agreed that enough was known to insure safe transport of their prize, the expedition was then brought to a swift close.

The present conclave quickly came together in Gerry’s presence. Analyses of vegetation and general environment and other data were quickly given. A few unexpected items were brought out. The first concerned the planet itself. Apparently Saturn, locally at least, was quite rich in uranium. That fact would have been worth a fortune a few years ago. Since the discovery of vast uranium deposits on the Moon, however, uranium on as distant a planet as Saturn was interesting, but of no particular value.

More to the point was the fact that some of the plant life, particularly the cabbagelike favorite of the dermaphos, seemed to utilize uranium as Earthly plants utilize sulphur and other minerals. Deposits of uranium salts had been found in the foliage.

Most interesting of all was Dr. Kelly’s report, based on a quick check of the sample of dermaphos flesh which Strike had brought in.

“The fact that the beast didn’t phosphoresce had been worrying me,” he explained. “It occurred to me that perhaps it was a fluorescence that showed up in Murray’s pictures. Of course, the dermaphos doesn’t noticeably fluoresce to the naked eye, either. But there are quite a few mineral salts which fluoresce under the impact of ultra-violet. I remembered that the

electroscopes showed the presence of uranium, which reacts under ultra-violet rays.

“Then I thought it was entirely possible that Murray’s photos were taken with UV flash bulbs of photo-floods. So I experimented with my own camera, and some UV lights. Sure enough, it’s the uranium in the dermaphos itself that causes it to glow under ultra-violet! It eats uranium. Just why, no one could say without prolonged study of the animal, both alive and dissected.

“Our bodies use many minerals, of course. My guess would be that uranium salts act as a catalytic agent in the processes of metabolism and digestion, somewhat as some of our own ductless gland secretions. Then, after their work is done, they are eliminated unchanged through the skin. That’s only a guess, of course—”

“Good work, men,” Gerry cut in. “It tells me what I want to know. We can make our capture immediately. I want to pull out of here at once, because our rival has been prowling around and might think it cute to hijack our dermaphos. Barrows.”

“Yes, Miss Carlyle?”

“The hold is fully prepared?”

“Two of them are replicas of Saturn to the last detail. I have put all the incidental specimens like the kites and the Screaming Meemies in one hold, according to your orders. The second hold is reserved for the dermaphos. He rides alone, so there will be no chance of a free-for-all fight ruining our prize.”

“Then radio Kranz,” Gerry ordered. “Tell him to make the capture. It should be quite simple. Use anesthetic gas bombs, of course. The rest of you prepare to take off.”

Quickly the control room emptied, leaving only Gerry and Strike. For perhaps fifteen minutes they worked silently, making ready for the departure. Then Strike, glancing out the forward port, spied Kranz returning on the double-quick with his squad. Behind them, suspended by gravity bands adjusted to neutralize exactly the force of gravity, the sleeping dermaphos was hauled along.

“Kranz is back,” said Strike. “He has the prize.”

Gerry jumped, her nerves on edge.

“Good.” She sighed with relief. “That finishes us up here. A good job well done, and will I be glad to leave this place! Nothing left now but a few comfortable weeks in space, then the victory celebration. Professor Kurtt, I’m happy to say, is stymied.”

Strike said nothing. He had a nagging sense of having overlooked something, a feeling almost of foreboding. It had all been too easy so far. Was it just a sort of calm before the fury?

It was. When they were only a short distance from Saturn disaster struck.
“Abandon ship!”

The call rang through loudspeakers in every corner of the mighty rocket craft.

“Abandon ship. Prepare to abandon ship.”

That cry had resounded throughout *The Ark* many times before, but only in periodical lifeboat drills, practise for an emergency that no one dreamed would ever really arise. *The Ark*, one of the greatest of space ships, had been built with every resource of modern science to render it impregnable against the assaults of space or unpredictable conditions on alien worlds. Could such a ship ever be destroyed? It seemed impossible.

The quiet, icy voice of Gerry Carlyle, as calm as if she were ordering dinner, came through the speakers in every compartment.

“Abandon ship. Prepare to abandon ship.”

Throughout the length and breadth of *The Ark* there was orderly confusion. The mighty hull shivered suddenly, racked by some terrible internal disturbance. It was the fifth explosion of rapidly increasing severity that had shaken her from stem to stern.

The report from the engine room was incoherent. The huge centrifuges seemed to be crumbling, flying apart inexplicably. As each cluster of rotors broke away, it hurtled with frightful speed clean through the double walls of the ship. The control panel was a jumble of wreckage, as if smashed by the blast of some cosmic shotgun. It was only a miracle that there were no casualties yet.

As oxygen rushed out into the vacuum of space, automatic bulkheads began to rumble shut. Tortured metal screamed somewhere deep in the ship. Presently the acrid stench of ammonia filtered through the corridors. At least one of the animal holds with internal pressure equal to that of Saturn's atmosphere, had blown outward, perhaps weakened by the rupturing of the adjacent engine room walls.

There was no panic. Speedily the members of the crew gathered up those items of equipment that were designated as “vital” in case of such emergency. Then, three to a car, they entered the miniature rocket ships within special locks in the sides of *The Ark*. A signal flashed on each control board. The pilots flashed back their readiness for the take-off.

Abruptly the ship spouted monsters and rockets like a surrealist Roman candle.

In the glassite bow of *The Ark*, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike, true to ancient traditions, waited for their crew to get clear before they abandoned their ship. As each lifeboat shot away, another light gleamed on a panel in the pilot room.

Finally there were seven lights showing. All the life-boats but one were clear. Hovering at a safe distance from *The Ark*, they waited for further orders. Gerry took a final look about the room. It had been more of a home to her than any other place. Then Strike and Chief Astronaut Lews hurried in. They had stowed away the charts and instruments.

“All set, gentlemen?” Gerry asked coolly.

“All set.”

Both men carefully avoided any sentimentality. They knew Gerry was as bitterly heart-broken as they were, and knew also that she would fiercely resent any suggestion of feminine weakness. It was one of the traits for which they admired her.

The three of them stepped into the last lifeboat and Strike sent the little rocket streaking away out of immediate danger. They took a backward glance, after they had withdrawn about a half-mile. The stricken *Ark* was drifting helplessly.

Slowly revolving, she revealed a gaping hole in her stern. The tangled ruins of one of her centrifuges dangled from the gash like exposed intestines. Outlined against the bright hull was one of the Saturnian kites. It had been cast forth when one of the holds near the engine room had given way. Accustomed to withstand Saturn’s pressures, the kite had literally exploded into tatters. That was what would happen when all the specimens were exposed to empty space.

Gerry shuddered. Quickly, though, she established short-wave communication with the castaways and rallied them around like a cluster of silvery, flame-spurting metal fish. The first thing was to take stock of their situation.

On the credit side was the fact that they had been less than twenty-four hours away from Saturn, and still accelerating, when the accident struck them down. Saturn loomed gigantic in the sky. Its eternal rainbow rings looked so near, it seemed almost as if one could reach out and break off a piece.

Before Gerry could issue an order, an excited voice hammered through her loudspeaker.

“Miss Carlyle! Captain Strike! A spaceship is coming up under the stern of *The Ark!*”

Gerry and Strike stared at each other in electric tension. Another ship? Rescue?

“This is incredible,” said Gerry in an awed tone. “Why, the odds against another ship being in this part of the Solar System at this particular moment must be billions to one.” Sudden misgivings troubled her. “You don’t suppose—”

They ran into each other, striving to see out of the forward port. Gerry groaned.

“It’s that Kurtt! He would show up at a time like this. I’d almost rather not be rescued than to have—”

“This wouldn’t be more than mere coincidence, would it?” Strike asked, his voice low and tense.

The radiophone signal buzzed. Gerry reluctantly snapped the switch. Coming through the televisor, Kurtt’s buttery voice fairly dripped sympathy.

“Are you there, Miss Carlyle? Dear, dear, what a shocking disaster! I sincerely trust that no one has been injured. What could possibly have been the matter? Some structural weakness, no doubt.”

Strike saw Gerry beginning to seethe.

“This is a time for diplomacy, kitten,” he whispered. Facing the transmitter, he said: “Look, Kurtt. We’ve cracked up. Under these circumstances, of course, our little contest must be put aside. If you’d be so good as to ease over this way and take us aboard—”

“All in good time, Mr. Strike,” Kurtt replied soothingly. “All in good time.”

But his ship, instead of rescuing the castaways, moved alongside *The Ark* fastening itself to the riven hull like a leech. With a strangled exclamation, Gerry seized a pair of binoculars. She could see right through the glassed-in portion of Kurtt’s ship. That part of the hold was partially filled with Saturnian vegetation, mostly the artichoke type and Blue Plate Special plants, doubtless intended to feed captured specimens. There were a few of these visible, but no dermaphos.

But the presence of the dermaphos was not long in coming. Mistily, through the green glass, Gerry could see figures moving, a port sliding open. Choking with rage, she cried out:

“The thief is helping himself to our dermaphos! We spent weeks preparing to make our capture, before finding one of the things. And now he helps himself, just like that. How does he get that way?”

As if in answer to her anguished exclamation, Kurtt’s unctuous voice became audible again.

“Laws of savage, Miss Carlyle, as you know. I hate to take advantage of your misfortune. Still, all’s fair in love and war. Rather lucky for me that I happened along. I hadn’t had time to locate a dermaphos before you were all ready to leave. That’s the penalty of traveling in a slower ship. How fortunate that your specimen was still secure in its compartment. Might have been thrown free and ruined.”

“Okay!” snapped Strike. “You’ve got the dermaphos. Now give us a hand here, will you?”

“Ah, I was coming to that. As a matter of fact, my poor ship is so small. That’s the penalty of not being wealthy and glamorous. You see, there is hardly room for any more passengers. Insufficient food and oxygen, you understand. I might take two or three aboard, but how can I choose whom to take and whom to leave behind?” He registered pious shock. “Oh, my, no!”

Then he continued.

“I’m so sorry, but it is beyond my poor capabilities to aid you. However, be assured that I shall send out rescue parties just as soon as I get within radio range of Earth.”

Thunderstruck, Strike stared at the microphone as if it had turned into a snake.

“Kurtt!” he bellowed. “You can’t do this. It’s murder! You wouldn’t go off and leave us stranded in mid-space. Kurtt, are you listening?”

But Kurtt’s rocket ship was already gathering momentum. It spewed flame in a great red blossom, kicking sharply away from the side of *The Ark*. For a supposedly slow ship, it gathered speed surprisingly as the pilot recklessly poured in the fuel. Within a minute’s time it dwindled. Then its dark shape was abruptly lost in the blackness of interstellar space.

Strike turned to his fiancée.

“I had a hunch we were underestimating that bird. He’s as cold-blooded a killer as the most vicious specimen we ever caught. Well, there goes everything. Von Zorn has backed a winner at last. The Zoo contract, *The Ark*, and us—wiped out.”

Gerry’s shoulders twitched. Strange, burbling sounds came from her throat. Suddenly she threw back her head and burst into hearty laughter.

“Oh, I just thought of something. What a joke on poor Kurtt! Only he doesn’t know it yet.”

Strike and Lewis stared at one another in horrified astonishment. Was Gerry Carlyle of the iron nerves and the stout heart giving way to hysteria? The mere idea was a grim reminder that they were in a predicament from which there was little hope of escape. The two men quickly looked away, pretending to busy themselves with nothing in particular. The girl’s hearty laughter abruptly ceased.

“Stop acting like silly boys who were caught stealing the jam! I’m not hysterical. It is a joke, a colossal one. But I’m determined to be there when Kurtt finds out about it. It’s too good to miss. So let’s get busy and find a way out of this mess.”

Quickly Gerry opened a small locker, took out the Emergency Chart every astronaut must have before being allowed to leave Earth. A map of the Solar System, it was marked to indicate the nearest source of aid in case of breakdown, illness or any other disaster at any particular point in space.

Gerry’s finger quickly traced out the Saturnian system. The four inner satellites were colored black, signifying that they were airless chunks of rock, utterly useless for any purpose.

Rhea was marked with a red cross to indicate mineral wealth. Both the outer satellites, Iapetus and Phoebe, had arrows to show rocket fuel and food caches for stranded space wanderers. Hyperion was too small to be considered. But Titan, largest of all, had both blue and red crosses, indicating habitability plus mineral wealth.

Gerry was faced with the need of making a vital decision. Moreover, there would be no changing that decision once it was made. Of that handful of satellites, they could manage a lucky landing on only one. After they made their choice, there would be no getting away again unless and until *The Ark* was repaired. The tiny, short-range life-boats would be useless for cosmic distances.

Coolly Gerry stowed the Emergency Chart away and turned to the row of slim reference books that lined the bottom shelf. This little library was her pride. The most complete of its kind in the System, it had been compiled by Gerry herself.

It was a digest of every known fact concerning the planets, their satellites, and the asteroids. In it were represented every space explorer from Murray to the present, and the gleanings of knowledge by interplanetary hunters like Hallek and Gerry Carlyle. There was also a lengthy contribution—Gerry made a wry face—by Anthony Quade, Society of Spatial

Cameramen, and the data he had collected while roaming the void for movie locations.

She opened up the volume on Saturn and its satellites, turned to Titan and quickly flipped the pages. Titan was extraordinarily rich in minerals of almost every conceivable type. Only transportation costs prevented mining there. Also, its atmosphere was breathable, its temperatures apparently not lethally extreme.

More remarkable, according to Murray's writings, there was civilized life on Titan. The cities there had been built with an amazing genius for metal-working. But Murray's notes were sketchy on the subject. It seemed that the inhabitants of Titan were few in number and difficult to communicate with, though quite friendly.

The fact that highly evolved life existed on the satellite was not startling. Advanced civilizations had been discovered in at least three other places in the System. If any nomadic tribe, gifted with the ability to work in metals, had wandered in from outer space and decided to locate in the Solar System, it was only natural for them to select Titan and its wealth of ores.

Gerry was not interested in making any social contacts at the moment. But it was the fact of life on Titan that motivated her final decision. *The Ark* needed metals for repair, and they were to be had on Titan. As a last resort, the inhabitants might conceivably be able to help. The girl weighed this possibility carefully against the undeniable fact that if any other rocket ships were to enter the Saturnian system, they would land only on the two outer satellites, never on Titan. Confident in her own self-reliance and the ability of her crew, though, Gerry made her choice.

Incisively she gave her orders. The eight little life-boats moved purposefully toward *The Ark*. Jockeying skillfully into place like tugs about an ocean liner, they began to haul the mighty spaceship toward its rendezvous. Saturn's largest satellite was rapidly hurtling closer to the site of the disaster.

At first there was little appreciable progress. Then gradually momentum was gathered, aided by the growing effect of the satellite's gravity. More swiftly moved *The Ark*, till the life-boats were forced to reverse their positions and act as brakes. The surface of Titan expanded with a terrifying rush. Desperately the miniature rocket ships strove to check the dangerous descent, blasting furiously with every available ounce of their limited fuel supply. In the final moments before the crash, the entire underside of *The Ark* was obscured by the savage blaze of the little rocket-tubes.

Timing it perfectly, Gerry gave the order to dart away from underneath the falling juggernaut. With an awful concussion, *The Ark's* stern plowed deep into the soil of Titan, throwing a huge powdery wave into the air. Then, almost in slow motion, the rest of the tremendous metal giant toppled downward. Rocks and dust sprayed out on either side. *The Ark* lurched once like a dying monster, and gently rolled over on one side.

Gerry smiled, pleased with her expertness. She had brought the ship down so its torn hull would be easy to reach.

Gently, like a flock of curious birds, the life-boats fluttered to rest in a ragged circle. Gerry dabbed at her forehead with a wisp of handkerchief, then smiled hardily at the two men.

“Well, here we are on Titan, without benefit of brass bands.” She paused, before continuing in a casual voice. “You know, I wonder if the place is destined to be our tomb.”

The eyes of every occupant in the eight life-boats gazed questioningly at the surface of the strange little world. Had Gerry Carlyle's fanatical attention to detail paid dividends again, enabling her to select the one right place for them to land? Or had the sketchy information in her library betrayed them into descending into a hostile environment? Perhaps it would be so freezingly cold that repairs to *The Ark* would be impossible. In that case, they were doomed to a lingering death.

In the main boat, Gerry and Strike were relieving the tension of doubt by swift routine, refusing to take anything for granted. Thermometers, atmospheric drift gauges, barometers, and bolometers were projected through vacuum suction tubes. Air samples were drawn in through the Bradbury valves and automatically analyzed. Visual observations were made through the glass-site ports, for Titan was rather well lighted by the reflected glow of Saturn.

The surface of the satellite was irregular, hilly. Jagged cones of possible volcanic origin formed a low range of foothills, with a pass leading to the region beyond. Dunes of fluffy material like volcanic tuff dotted the near landscape.

This and other reports were exchanged between the life-boats. Presently a complete picture began to appear. It was even more favorable than suggested by Murray's notes. The thin atmosphere was largely nitrogen, helium and oxygen, with indications of negligible amounts of other gases in unstable equilibrium. Methane was present in small amounts. This, being the product of organic decomposition, indicated vegetable life.

The temperature was only slightly below freezing. Doubtless Titan received heat from Saturn and the Sun, almost undiminished by any absorbent atmospheric layers. Gravity on a body only a few thousand miles in diameter would be relatively weak, less than half normal Earth gravity.

With understandable pride, for the value of her incredible thoroughness had proved itself again, Gerry finally contacted all the life-boats.

“We’re perfectly safe, men. Dress warmly. Carry a bottle of oxygen with a tube, and take a breath of it every minute or so in order to prevent blood bubbles from forming. Hand weapons, of course, just in case. So, everybody out!”

A faint cheer returned to her through the communicator. The life-boats disgorged their human cargo. After a brief period of leg-stretching and adjusting to temperature and weak gravity, Gerry immediately organized her forces to cope with their grave predicament.

The extent of damage had to be surveyed by the engineers and workmen. Then a party under Strike’s leadership prepared to reconnoiter the immediate vicinity to make sure they were in no danger from hostile life-forms. They used one of the life-boats, powered with the little fuel remaining in the tanks of the other seven. Finally Gerry herself led a small expedition to examine thoroughly the other parts of *The Ark*.

Strike reported all clear. The only thing of interest was one of the cities Murray described. It was just a few miles away, but apparently long deserted. Gerry reported that the damage to the ship was surprisingly small. The crash upon Titan had been eased expertly. A few dents in the hull and a number of fixtures torn loose inside were the only internal casualties. Two compartments had been torn open to outer space—the engine room and the first Saturian hold next to it.

Both groups gathered around outside the tangle that once was the engine room, watching the workmen clear the debris away. With oxygen bottles in one hand and tubes leading to their mouths, they looked like a group of solemn Turks puffing on their hookahs.

Inside, where the engineers crawled about with portable X-ray equipment, were twin centrifuges. Running in opposite directions to obviate torque, they were composed of thousands of tiny rotors spinning at a rate of nearly fifty thousand revolutions per second.

The principle had been worked out three-quarters of a century before by Professor Rouss, of the University of Virginia. Rouss ran rotors eight thousand revolutions a second in blasts of compressed air, achieving centrifugal force a million times as strong as gravity. *The Ark*, a mighty

centrifugal flier, was the ultimate development of that early experiment and the double centrifuge in her stern was powerful enough to move a great mountain.

After an hour's steady labor, the Chief Engineer reported to Gerry. There was an odd look on his face.

"Well, Baumstark," she urged impatiently. "What's the score?"

Speaking in clipped phrases, Baumstark replied.

"Seem to have two outs on us, Miss Carlyle. We've pretty thoroughly X-rayed the mess. The starboard centrifuge is undamaged, but the others are in a bad way." He held up several strips of film. "You can see what the Laue patterns show—advanced crystallization. Big sections of the rotors collapsed from metal fatigue at the same time, and flew apart."

"Do you have any idea what caused it?" she asked tersely.

Baumstark took a battered ruin of tubes and coils from one of the workmen. He offered this as evidence.

"This probably was a vibration pack. We found it crushed in among a cluster of shattered rotors. Someone deliberately introduced it into the centrifuges, and it created rhythms that induced metal fatigue. We've been sabotaged, Miss Carlyle."

Gerry and Strike exchanged a long look of slowly dawning comprehension.

"So," murmured Strike. "My hunch was right. Friend Kurtt evidently found time to do the job right before Barrows found him wandering around inside *The Ark*. Clever, in a way, much better than a bomb. It became effective only when we started the centrifuges for our take-off. Kurtt wanted to be sure he wouldn't wreck things till we were well out in space. With luck, the vibrator would have been hurled out through the hole in the hull, and we would never have known the cause of the trouble.

"Kurtt, of course, simply had to hang around near Saturn, wait till we showed up, and then tag along at a safe distance. Sooner or later, he knew he could grab our dermaphos without an argument. No wonder he was so agreeable when the dermaphos was chosen, and no wonder he picked Saturn. It's far enough out of the way so it would be unlikely that anyone would be around to interfere or rescue us."

Gerry, whose intuitive distrust had been proved so well founded, took this evidence of utterly cold-blooded treachery with surprising calm. She smiled with grim promise.

"I rather pity poor Von Zorn when we get back."

Strike looked troubled.

“You don’t think Von Zorn actually ordered Kurtt to do anything like this do you?”

“Oh, no. He doesn’t like me, because I know him for the faker he is. But he fights fair. That much I grant. No. Von Zorn will be appalled when he learns what his hireling has been up to. But the fact remains that Kurtt is Von Zorn’s man. And I think I can do business with that fact when we return.”

“If we return, you mean. Kurtt never meant to let us survive, and he’s done a pretty good job so far.”

“Right. That’s the next question.” She turned to the chief engineer. “Baumstark, can we manage with the one centrifuge?”

“No, miss.”

“Then how about repairs?”

Baumstark glanced around resignedly, wet his lips and shrugged.

“Dozens of rotors and stators either gone or badly weakened. Probably two hundred replacements necessary. We have a few spares, that’s all. I—I don’t see how it’s possible for us to get *The Ark* moving, miss.”

There was profound silence. Strike’s heart dropped to his boots as he thought of Kurtt speeding to triumph with the fruits of their labors. Then he grinned wryly.

“Did I hear something just then?”

Gerry raised her lovely, troubled face and gazed at him inquiringly.

“I think that third out just whizzed past us into the shortstop’s mitt.”

Of all the women in the System, Gerry Carlyle was probably the least prone to accept an adverse decision without bitter protest.

Before any sense of defeatism could overcome her men, she was snapping orders with her accustomed spirit. In *The Ark*’s tiny workshop was a small electric induction furnace. Gerry had that brought outside. Then she dispatched four men with ore-finding doodlebugs. The latest development not only located bodies of metallic ores, but also, by registering infinitesimal differences of electrical resistance, indicated what kind of metal was present.

A powerful alloy had to be used to withstand the terrific speeds of the centrifuges. Only a combination of strong but light beryllium and the densely strong but heavy neutroxite, not found on Earth, could be used. These had to be located by the ore hunters.

There were other difficulties, though. Baumstark seemed to draw them from his helmet like a magician. The first was the fact that to smelt ores,

their induction furnace would eat a tremendous amount of amperes. So much power could never be provided by the generator that operated the lights in *The Ark*.

“Rewind the generator,” was Gerry’s reply.

Then Baumstark pointed out that they hadn’t a source of power sufficient to keep that generator moving to produce the necessary amperes. Tommy Strike solved this one.

“Steam,” he said. “Haul out one of those tanks we use to carry aquatic specimens and set it up as a boiler. Just beyond that pass there, about half a mile away, there’s a forest of some sort. Leafless trees in all kinds of queer geometric shapes. Perfect for firewood. I saw no evidence of water on Titan while we were scouting around, but we can fix a trap that will save most of our steam. So we’ll be able to use the same water over and over again.”

The ease with which obstacles were overcome by the ingenuity of the captain and crew of *The Ark* inspired a cumulative feeling of irresistibility in all of them. Gerry glowed with pride. This was the result of her careful selection, severe discipline, rigid training, and years of constant reminder that every possible contingency should be anticipated.

Under some circumstances, she might even have welcomed this challenge to her ability and self-sufficiency. But the terrible threat of Kurtt—which paradoxically loomed larger the farther he sped from them—left no time for any complacency.

One thing was lacking before they could commence their work, and it was found within the hour. The ore hunters came charging into camp with a gleam of triumph in their eyes, like that of a Forty-niner who had struck the mother lode. Both beryllium and neutroxite had been located nearby, practically on the surface of the ground. It would be a comparatively simple matter to mine it in quantity.

Gerry at once parceled out the various jobs, and work commenced furiously. At that particular season of the Titanian year, the satellite was illuminated by either the Sun or Saturn for three-fourths of its day. Hence, by working shifts, the crew of *The Ark* lost little time because of darkness.

The only delays were caused by unforeseen difficulties. The first occurred at the slanting shaft drilled into the hillside, following a vein of almost pure neutroxite. Returning to work after the first short night, the men found the stope had collapsed. Gerry’s examination revealed that four holes, about six inches in diameter and close together, had been bored low in the wall of the shaft, weakening it to the point of breakdown. The holes were smooth as glass, and apparently continued into the very bowels of Titan.

“If none of you fellows dug these holes,” observed Gerry, “then they must have been made by a burrowing animal of some kind. I’ll stick around while you work and see if I can’t spot our hecklers.”

Digging continued, with men lugging sacks of the heavy ore back to *The Ark*. The light gravity enabled them to handle what would have been hundreds of pounds on Earth. Presently a muffled, whirring sound came from inside the tunnel, and the workmen popped out in a hurry. Gerry, heat-ray in hand, set herself at the tunnel mouth.

At the rear came a sudden flurry of rock dust, and a remarkable creature burst into view. It was about the size of a woodchuck, but quite round. Its mouth was set precisely in the center of its head, perfectly circular, and was armed with a formidable set of teeth. Two tiny eyes glittered deep in their furry sockets. Balancing upright like a weighted doll, it stared solemnly at Gerry Carlyle.

The girl moved forward quietly, hoping to capture it by the scruff of the neck. Immediately the animal turned to face the wall of the cave. A number of little flippers, placed at haphazard spots all over its body, sprang into view. The creature began to spin in a clockwise motion at a furious rate, literally boring into the ground with its terrific teeth. In ten seconds the strange creature had vanished.

It was Kranz, peering in astonishment over Gerry’s shoulder, who named it in a burst of inspiration.

“Call it a Rotary Mole!”

The Rotary Moles—there were four in the local family—proved quite a nuisance with their constant burrowing into the mine shaft. When driven out, they sat around staring curiously at the operations like so many sidewalk superintendents watching an excavation. In desperation, Gerry was forced to devise a method of capturing them.

She abhorred the wanton killing of wild life, which rendered useless her high-powered hypodermic rifles. They would destroy any animal as small as the Mole. Also, the anesthetic gas dispersed too quickly in the thin Titanian air to be of much good.

After brooding awhile over a method to catch the things harmlessly, one of the men gave Gerry the clue. To scare the Moles away, he threw a half-empty can at them. They darted off, then came racing back to the splotch where the pineapple juice had soaked into the ground. At once they all up-

ended and began to spin, boring madly into the damp spot. Unquestionably they had a passion for fruit juices.

That made it easy. Gerry built a box trap and filled it with soil. Then she set it out the second night and emptied two cans of juice on it. The next morning they had four Rotary Moles in a sadly battered trap. Another hour would have enabled them to win to freedom.

“What a testimonial for the pineapple people!” Gerry gloated, as she stowed the Rotary Moles out of harm’s way. “They ought to be glad to pay plenty for it.”

After the boiler-generator-furnace hook-up had begun to function, another interruption occurred. The first batch of neutroxite had been poured into sand molds. The smelting of more ore was proceeding satisfactorily, when the electricity unaccountably weakened. Checking along the wires from the generator to the furnace, Strike found what appeared to be a rather slender copper bar lying across the wires. With the toe of his boot he kicked it aside.

Three minutes later there was another short in the circuit. Tommy again was forced to remove the apparent copper bar from the wires. This time, after kicking it away, he bent down to pick it up. He received a mild electric shock. When he dropped the thing hastily, the copper bar began to walk away.

“So,” murmured Strike grimly. “You want to play.”

He pursued the perambulating bar. It ducked swiftly into the pile of wood used to fire up the boiler. With one sweep Strike spread the fuel about the landscape, but there was no copper bar to be seen.

He began to swear softly as he peered around. Gerry, fascinated by his antics, came over.

“What goes on now?” she demanded.

Strike explained briefly.

“It must be a sort of chameleonlike thing,” he concluded. “First it imitated the wires. Now it’s imitating the sticks of wood. Probably generates a current within itself like an electric eel. Maybe if we wait around, it’ll move again.”

Gerry snorted in exasperation.

“And no doubt it amuses and warms itself by shorting our wires at every opportunity. Another monkey-wrench in the machinery that we’ll have to dig out.”

Carefully they began to sort the woodpile, searching for a stick that would give them a mild jolt. A loud complaint from Baumstark warned them. Behind their backs, the chameleon had sneaked over to absorb the juice from the furnace lead-ins again.

They tried to surround the thing, which now resembled a copper bar. But it scuttled away lizard-fashion much too rapidly to be caught. Thoroughly annoyed by these alarming delays, Gerry said reluctantly:

“We’ve got no time to waste in studying that little beggar, and find out how to capture it. If I don’t get an inspiration within an hour or two, we’ll just have to kill it outright.”

Fortunately the inspiration came. In Gerry’s quarters was a large mirror, her one concession to feminine vanity while on expedition. This she carried outside and set up alongside the chameleon’s favorite spot—the electric wires—tilting it so it would reflect nothing but the dark-blue sky.

The third brief night passed, and Gerry awoke to the sound of hilarious laughter. Hurrying out, she found Tommy guffawing and pointing inarticulately. The chameleon, in its natural state looked like an ordinary chunk of flesh with legs. It lay twisting futilely before the mirror, sputtering feeble electric sparks. Part of it was blue as the sky, while the rest shaded into a rapidly shifting mottled color.

“The poor devil tried at first to imitate nothing, looking up at space,” Strike explained finally. “Then it must’ve caught sight of its reflection in the mirror and tried to imitate itself! The natural result was a complete nervous breakdown!”

After this interlude, nothing arose to interrupt their work. Metals were smelted, poured into molds. Emery wheels howled as the little rotors were ground smooth. Before long they were ready to be welded into place in the matrix of the huge centrifuge. That was when they faced the most appalling complication of all. It was found impossible to weld the rotors!

“It’s the beryllium, miss,” explained Baumstark worriedly. “We used only moderate heat to smelt it. That was okay. We had to use a terrific temperature to smelt the neutroxite. That was okay, too. But now, in order to weld, we have to use enough heat to affect the neutroxite, and it’s too much for the beryllium. It just oxidizes away. We need a flux, and it can’t be made.”

After everything had been going so well, for this apparently unsurmountable obstacle to arise was almost enough to drive even a Gerry Carlyle to tears. Had she finally made the fatal mistake that all adventurers sooner or later commit?

When she had chosen Titan to land upon, rather than the outer satellites, she had made a gamble. By going to Iapetus or Phoebe, it might have been possible to cram the life-boats with rocket fuel, leaving room for only one person to pilot. With skillful navigation and great luck, some of them might have been able to make the Jovian satellites, and the mining outpost on Ganymede, to organize a rescue party for those left on Titan. Instead, Gerry had characteristically decided to shoot for big stakes. It was a wager—complete repair of *The Ark* and triumph in the race with Kurtt, against annihilation. She had wanted all or nothing.

And for the first time Gerry Carlyle knew the sick, stifling sensation of despair.

But there was one last trump in her hand. Gerry still had the notes in Murray's diary concerning a civilized race on Titan, with remarkable skill in the use of metals. If those people were still on Titan, perhaps they could help. If they were gone, as Strike's report of a deserted city would indicate, perhaps the castaways could read from the ruins something that might be of assistance to them.

There was still fuel left in one lifeboat, so Gerry, Strike, and Lieutenant Barrows piled in. They took off with a roar, heading straight "north" for the city Tommy had seen earlier. After swiftly covering about six miles, they sighted it. Half a mile from its limits was a level plain, and there Strike set the rocket ship down gently.

At a cautious distance the trio examined the strange city. It appeared to have been built for a population of approximately twenty thousand, by Earthly standards. It had been constructed on the basis of some baffling, alien geometry. The designs resembled the geometry of man, but the patterns just evaded complete comprehension, barricading themselves in the mind just beyond the borderline of full meaning. All around its edges, the city was crumbling to ruin, as if some invisible monster of decay were slowly eating toward the center, which was still in excellent repair. And in all that weirdly beautiful expanse, not a single living thing moved. Barrows broke the quiet.

"Isn't it incredible how persistent and unconquerable life is? We find it everywhere, under the most terrible conditions—the inferno of Mercury, the stewpot of Venus, and crawling under tons of pressure on Saturn. Now even on this barren rock, a great civilization evolved. Those Arrhenius spores sure got around, didn't they?"

Gerry smiled. "I doubt if what we see out there actually evolved on this empty ball of stone. Probably it came from some other universe, many eons in the past. Shall we explore it without waiting for reinforcements?"

There was no dissenting voice. Gerry always meted out harsh punishments for infractions of her safety-first rules, but now time was working swiftly against them. Besides, the place looked so deserted, there seemed to be no reason for the usual caution.

So they moved into the city. Their first discovery was that it had been built for a race of beings smaller than humans, giving it the appearance of a large scale model of a city. Doorways were five feet in height, windows in proportion. Oddly, there were neither doors nor window panes, suggesting utter indifference to temperature changes. Nor were the buildings, anywhere save for a few curiously graven towers, more than three stories in height.

As the Terrans walked slowly toward the heart of the city, they found it in a remarkable state of preservation. The streets were clean, totally devoid of rubble or dust. It almost seemed as if the place were waiting patiently for the return of its masters, tended daily by some mysterious, invisible presence. The echoes of their booted feet rattled in the emptiness.

Gradually, as Gerry led her scouts into the center of the city, a curious feeling began to make them uneasy. They had a gradually increasing sensation that they were not alone, as they paused irresolutely, every nerve on the alert. Did they really hear that stealthy rustling in the depths of the mysterious, darkened apartments? A cautious peek within showed strangely malformed furniture, but no living thing.

“I don’t like this,” said Gerry uncomfortably, one hand on her heat-ray gun. “Perhaps—”

The brassy clangor of a mighty gong shattered the stillness with two tremendous, shivering notes. Gerry, Strike, and Barrows raced in a breathless sprint for open country. With wild, awkward bounds that broke Olympic records at every leap, they scrambled and sailed not pausing for breath till they were out of the city and safe beside their little rocket ship.

When they stared back through the grayish daylight, they received an even greater shock. The city was alive! Peopled with bipeds moving about the streets, in and out of buildings, it was just like any normal town. The change was so abrupt, that the terrestrial explorers gaped at the city, then at each other, too shocked to speak.

Gerry was first to recover the use of her voice. She used it to get in radio communication with the *Ark*.

“Listen carefully, Kranz,” she ordered. “We’ve discovered civilized life here. There’s not much rocket fuel left. So instead of our coming back in the lifeboat, I want you to lead a reinforcement party. Head straight north, through the little pass. But first go to my room and look in the locker behind

the door. On the top shelf you'll find a contraption that looks like a half-dozen wired bowls attached to a power unit. Bring it out, and take along a new supply of oxygen bottles."

Instead of settling down to wait, Strike unhooked his binoculars for a long look at the city's inhabitants.

"They're nothing to be afraid of," he decided. "They're less than five feet tall, slender, delicate built. Besides, didn't Murray say they were friendly? They'll probably recognize us as humans, just like Murray. Come on. Let's pay 'em a visit now."

Gerry agreed dubiously, so the trio moved back toward the city to be met at its edge by a group of four Titanians. As Strike had said, they were frail, uniform in height to the last millimeter, and entirely hairless. They were dressed in metallic cloth wound around them like mummies' wrappings. It is obvious that they dressed for modesty rather than comfort, for their flesh was tough and hard.

Their features were generally human. But instead of ears, each possessed four filaments sprouting from each side of the head, and shaped like a lyre.

"Be nice to 'em," Gerry cautioned. "Remember, their good will may be our last hope."

One of the Titanians stepped forward with a graceful waving of hands, a low bow.

"Mradna luaow," he said politely.

Tommy grinned and imitated the other's bow.

"You don't say! Republican or Democrat?"

The Titanian smiled unmistakably, again bending low. Pointing to Gerry, he said:

"Ree yura norom."

"That's what I've always said," Tommy agreed amiably. "Great kid. But she needs a man around to keep her from getting big ideas."

After a few more exchanges of pleasantries, the Titanians led the castaways into the city.

It was entirely different this time, filled with the quiet hum of life. Vehicles moved silently and swiftly through the streets, though neither wheels nor motive power were visible. Occasionally they caught glimpses of an escalator inside the buildings. Throughout their tour, the strange people never once gave vent to any expression of surprise at sight of the visitors from Earth.

“They’re the most super-polite race I’ve ever seen,” Strike said uncomfortably. “In fact, too much so. They have the exaggerated formality and mannerisms of a decadent people.”

Gerry, slightly startled at this penetrating comment, agreed.

“Yes, the aura of decay does seem to saturate the place. A pity, too. They’re such nice little men.”

The tour of inspection, instead of clarifying, simply added more mysteries. There was no indication whatever of any central source of power generation or machinery. And nowhere did they see anyone at work. Titanian life seemed to be one long round of quiet amusement and leisure.

The journey ended before one of the Titanian apartments. Gerry and Strike entered, leaving Barrows outside to watch for Kranz. They found the odd furniture strangely comfortable, but were inconvenienced by the low ceiling and lack of light. Evidently the Titanians could see in the dark. Food was offered, but it was a case of one man’s meat being another’s poison. A polite taste or two made both of them temporarily ill.

Gerry picked up a vase-shaped object, beautifully molded of metal, though incredibly light. She tried to break it between her hands, then hammered it savagely on the wall.

“Not a dent!” she exclaimed in awe. “The stuff is some kind of alloy, too. Tommy, these people do have a secret that will enable us to repair *The Ark!* If we can only learn it—”

They looked at one another with rising excitement.

To kill time, Strike entertained the astonished Titanians with feats of strength that were quite simple in the reduced gravity. Then he tried to find a common denominator in an attempt to communicate with signs. He was less successful in this.

During this display, he made one disturbing discovery. There was a ragged, apparently bottomless hole in the floor at the back of the room. From this arose a nauseating odor suggestive of nameless evil.

Finally Kranz arrived with five other crew members. Strike, Gerry and Barrows took the oxygen bottles that were offered them. Then Gerry seized the apparatus which actually resembled a series of bowls joined by wires.

“Now!” she exclaimed in triumph. “Now we can really talk to these people.”

Her statement created a sensation, and the entire party crowded into the apartment. The Titanians seemed delighted at the prospect of entertaining this crowd of off-world strangers. They listened with every evidence of

profound interest as Gerry expounded the principles of the gadget she held in her hands.

“This is a thought helmet,” she declared, with an air of defying anyone to contradict her. She held up one of the bowl-like metal things, “an invention of my cousin Elmer at Federal Tech. It has built-in headphones, and contains a compact power unit. Thought, of course, is a delicate electrical wave that’s generated by the atoms of the brain. When the companion piece to this helmet is placed on the head of another person, each acts as a super-sensitive receiver of mutual electrical thought impulses.”

Strike made the mistake of offering an argument.

“So what? After you pick up your impulses, they’d have to be reproduced in your own brain. Did Elmer think of that?”

“Elmer has thought of everything,” Gerry replied bitingly, “except how to deal with impertinent interruptions. May I continue, please?”

“Um.”

“The impulses received are greatly amplified in the coils of these helmets. By electrical induction, they set up similar impulses in the brain of anyone who wears the helmet. So the wearer experiences the exact thoughts he has tuned in.” Gerry donned one of the helmets. Then, approaching one of the Titanians, she induced him by politely gentle signs to emulate her example. There were three other helmets with lead-ins to Gerry’s master helmet.

“These,” she explained, “are one-way receivers. You can hear what goes on, but your own thoughts are not broadcast. Otherwise there’d be an awful jumble. Here, Tommy, Barrows, Kranz . . . All set?”

Carefully Gerry threw a switch in her helmet and then the Titanian’s.

A faint humming sounded, but that was all. There were no thought impulses. Strike began to grin.

“I think I could beat Elmer just with my sign language.”

Gerry sighed. “My, aren’t we the impatient one, though!” The terrible uncertainty and lack of time reflected in her voice as sarcasm. “Human thought waves range within a narrow band of wave lengths and we must stay within that range to hear thoughts. Each brain has an infinitely fine difference from every other brain. We have to tune in.”

She began to twist a sunken vernier dial on the Titanian’s helmet, broadcasting a repetition of a single thought:

“We wish to be your friends. We wish to be your friends.”

The three men also twisted their dials and simultaneously picked up Gerry's unspoken thought. But before they could say anything, the Titanian's features also registered amazement and pleasure. He bowed and fluttered his hands ingratiatingly. Gerry raised her eyebrows in triumph.

"Now to tune in on our friend. I'll speak my thoughts aloud, so all you need to do is get on the Titanian wave length."

There was a moment of silent dial-twisting, and then the Titanian's thoughts came in with sudden strength.

"So happy to welcome the strange bipeds. Our homes, our sustenance, our lives are at your disposal."

This had the sound of ritual rather than a genuine offer. Gerry cut her switch momentarily and turned exultantly to Strike.

"Just think! We're in contact with an intelligent race, with all their customs, science, literature, and intellectual progress. Probably the culture of a planet from another universe. Why, a few weeks here may open up undreamed-of avenues of research in all lines of human endeavor!"

"We haven't got weeks to spare," interjected Strike, "Remember Kurtt?"

"Um, yes. Kurtt and the race."

Gerry suddenly looked harassed at this reminder that their lives depended upon her tact and ingenuity. She started to reestablish thought contact with the Titanian, but was interrupted by the booming gong that had frightened them earlier in the day.

The Titanians all spread their hands regretfully, mouthing their incomprehensible syllables. Gerry snapped the switch just in time to catch the end of the explanation.

"It is the Time of Offering now. We must retire. Please do not go away. We shall awaken shortly. Our homes are yours."

Bowing ingratiatingly, the Titanians lay down upon their curiously constructed beds and instantly dropped into a coma. All through the buildings came the rustling, pattering sound of thousands of tiny feet. The party from *The Ark* watched in wary bewilderment. The tension was snapped by Gerry's gasp.

"Look there—coming up through the hole in the floor!"

It was a hideously malformed little devil that stared around with bright, beady eyes at the intruders, then popped out into the room. It stood about three feet high, in appearance much like a seahorse. At the base of the nauseous, scaly body there were four short legs, ending in hoofs giving the

creature a topheavy appearance. Just as the Titanians were the epitome of kindness, this thing was stark evil.

“No sudden moves, boys,” Gerry ordered in quiet tones. “This monkey looks as if he could be pretty mean.”

There was intelligence in the beast’s eyes as it surveyed the unexpected situation. Abruptly the slender snout opened and it hissed, long and piercingly. It also recognized a foe.

War had been declared.

The group from *The Ark* pressed slowly back to await developments. There was something mysterious, unexplained. They wanted to learn the vital elements of the situation before deciding on a course of action.

The monster apparently took this withdrawal as capitulation, and promptly went about its business, ignoring the others. The hoofs made a faintly disturbing clop-clop as it crossed the room to bend over one of the sleeping Titanians. From its snout protruded a long, thin extension that was almost needle-like. Before anyone could speak or interrupt, it was plunged into the throat of the Titanian!

Action erupted in a swift flurry. Someone had his heat ray out in a flash, hurling a soundless, searing bolt. The monster doubled up in quick pain, nipping at the glowing spot on its horny hide. Then it turned, hissing viciously as it charged.

Cool and efficient, Gerry instantly took command.

“Concentrated heat beam,” she ordered calmly. “Its armor is too strong for diffused rays.”

As she spoke, she unsheathed and adjusted her own weapon with a single swift motion. While the monster drove at them, Gerry emotionlessly drilled it twice and stepped out of the path of the plunging body like a graceful bull-fighter. It crashed against the front wall and collapsed, smoking from half a dozen heat-ray blasts.

Immediately after the brief scuffle, two more ugly devils magically popped up into the room. For a moment it looked like real trouble in the confining, narrow room. The leading Titanian, however, stirred restlessly and raised himself on one elbow. He was groggy, like a bear roused from hibernation. But he managed to convey by gestures of negation that Gerry and the hunters were to do nothing to interrupt. Then he heavily dropped back on the couch and sank into a coma again.

“He wants us to lay off, men,” Gerry said in bewilderment. “Evidently this sort of thing goes on all the time. Maybe he isn’t being hurt, and will tell

us about it when he awakens. This whole business, though—” She shook her head. “It absolutely beats me.”

The new monsters methodically went about plunging their needle-like tongues into the sleeping Titanians’ exposed throats. Gerry repressed a shudder, turned sharply away. She found Strike making the most of the opportunity to study the body of the dead one.

“Find out anything?”

“A little,” he said abstractedly. “For one thing, this tongue-like jigger is sharp and bony. Also it’s hollow, like a hypodermic needle. And the cheeks inside are lined with pouches that’re partially filled with some oily stuff.”

Gerry forced herself to wait patiently while the ugly little monsters came in three relays to gouge at the necks of the helpless Titanians. Finally they disappeared for good, and the vague scurrying sounds all over the city died away to silence. This in turn was broken by the double note of the deep-toned gong.

The three Titanians awoke, bright-eyed and seemingly refreshed, to turn graciously again to their guests.

Eagerly Gerry donned the thought helmet once more, placing the corresponding helmet upon the leading Titanian. Gone now were all thoughts of delving into the mysteries of an ancient and dying civilization. Even the urgency of their terrible predicament faded momentarily before the importance of learning the queer relationship between the Titanians and the monsters.

“They are the Gora,” came the Titanian thought waves, anticipating Gerry’s questions. “They are native to this world.”

“Which means that you’re not?”

“No. Many ages ago, the Old Ones came here from a far star. There was death on our original home, though I know little about it. When we arrived here, our presence was resented by the Gora. But their catacombs were underground, and we did not interfere much with one another. Then it was discovered by the Gora that we people have a strange gland in our bodies—”

The Titanian lifted his chin to expose his throat. There was an opening there, reddened from the recent mistreatment.

“Formerly, when our race was expanding, our artisans worked miracles with metals by virtue of the secretion from this gland. Now, however, there is no longer any need to build, and that secret has been lost.”

A thrill of excitement passed through *The Ark’s* crew.

“So to us the gland is a vestigial organ of no value. But to the Gora, the secretion serves not only as food and drink, but as valuable plastic material for many uses. From the moment they learned this, there was constant warfare between us. Raiding parties of the Gora would lie in wait for incautious individuals, or occasionally make daring night raids into our homes. Once captured, a Titanian was rarely seen again live. He was doomed to a ghastly slavery far underground, a living death.

“We, in our turn, fought back with powerful weapons. Poison gases were released in the burrows of the Gora. Traps were set. But in the end, superior intelligence solved the terrible problem. To end the futile, destructive warfare, we as the dominant race made a pact with the inferior Gora. After all, the glandular secretion was of no particular importance to us. So we agreed that twice every planetary revolution we would set aside a brief period.

“During that time, the Gora are permitted to come up from below and replenish their supplies of the secretion. This period, known as the Time of Offering, is marked by the great gong. In return, the Gora agreed to take over all manual duties in running the city and keeping it in a fine state of repair. They clean our homes, operate all our machines, while we are free to engage in cultural pursuits and enjoy the more abundant life. Thus, by virtue of intellect, we have relegated the Gora to the status of our slaves.

“They are utterly dependent upon our glandular gifts. They must appease our every whim or suffer the consequences. We have a falling birth rate, which you may have guessed from the fact that the outer portions of our city are no longer in use. This fact also strengthens our dominant position.”

Strike and Gerry exchanged a long look of profound horror.

“What a monstrous bargain!” burst out Gerry in dismay.

Barrows smiled uncomfortably. “Why, the idiots actually think they put over a fast one! Why don’t they look around? Can’t they see the evidences of mental and moral decay, the results of easy living? Dominant race! The Gora give them a few concessions and grab off the secretion—the most precious thing they have.”

“Poor little children of Esau,” said Gerry somberly. “They sold their birthright for a mess of pottage.”

The Titanian, able to get only Gerry’s thoughts, bowed politely.

“I am sorry. I do not understand.”

Gerry removed her helmet, cradling it in her arm.

“I have an orange grove back in California,” she said with apparent irrelevancy. “We have a lot of trouble with ants.”

“Aunts?” queried Strike. “Troublesome relatives?”

“Ants. Those creatures that get into everything with amazing persistence.”

“That describes my female relatives, all right.”

“No, I’m serious, Tommy. Ants have an astonishingly complicated and well developed economy. They take plant-lice and carry them up to the tender young leaves of the citrus trees. They let the insect cows extract the vital juices of the plant. Then the ants return and stroke them with their feelers to induce them to exude this juice. The ants promptly harvest it and take it down into their formicaries. They handle aphides the way human beings handle cows, tending them and ‘milking’ them. Any encroachment upon their little system—lady-bird beetles, for instance, eat aphides—is met with fierce resistance.”

“I get the analogy. This relationship between Titanian and Gora is a parallel case. The Gora are pretty antlike in habits, at that. Symbiosis.”

There was a lengthy silence while the politely attentive Titanian looked from face to face, trying to interpret the expressions of pity and sorrow. Again, more heavily than ever, came the pressure of their desperate situation and the need for swift action. But it was sharpened now by the knowledge that a possible solution to their troubles was at hand.

Gerry slipped on her thought helmet again. In her most diplomatic manner, she began to dicker for a supply of the probably vital glandular secretion. The Titanian’s answering thoughts were evasive, regretfully negative. With a great show of deprecating hand-waving, he indicated that this would be a technical violation of their pact with the Gora. No amount of urging or offers of barter could move him.

Strike suddenly leaned over and snapped off the switch on Gerry’s helmet.

“Before you start losing your temper,” he urged, “and alienate them for good— Look. It’s obvious they’re scared stiff of what the Gora might do in retaliation. The stuff about violating their pact is just a pretext. And if they’re scared, there’s no persuading ’em. So I have an idea. Let’s call this visit quits for today, and I’ll tell you later what I’m planning.”

The distant Sun had already disappeared, and Saturn bulged low on the horizon. Gerry made excuses, refusing to impose upon Titanian hospitality further. She promised to return the next day to resume the interesting conversation. Escorted by the gracious Titanians, who were visibly relieved at the change of subject, Gerry and her men marched toward the hills where their rocket ship lay.

The lifeboat barely managed to accommodate the entire party. There appeared to be just sufficient fuel left to carry them back to *The Ark*. Gerry, before taking off, twisted around to speak.

“Would it be too much to ask just what’s on your mind, my sweet?”

Strike smiled. “Skip the sarcasm, kitten. Here’s the way I see it. We aren’t sure yet whether this Titanian stuff will help or not. That’s the first thing we must know. After that, maybe we’ll have reason to battle for it.”

“And how will we find out?”

Strike took from his shirt the decapitated head of the slain Gora and waved it aloft triumphantly.

“There’s a sample of the stuff inside the cheek-pouches of this thing. It’ll be enough for Baumstark to make a test.”

It didn’t take long, back at *The Ark*, for the chief engineer to grasp what was wanted. He promptly disappeared into the engine room with welding apparatus in one hand and a cupful of the all-important secretion in the other, searching for rotors and matrix upon which to experiment. A reddish glow flickered and shadows danced. Finally Baumstark reappeared. His grin was so wide that he dropped the oxygen tube from his mouth. He held up thumb and forefinger in a circle, squinting through it in glee.

“Perfect!” he gloated. “It works perfectly!”

Beyond question, the secret of the ancient Titanians’ genius with metals lay in their glandular secretion, which acted as a miraculous flux. It lowered the melting point of neutroxite far below beryllium’s danger point, fusing the alloy rotors onto their matrix beautifully.

There was a swift gabble of explanations from the scouting party to the crew members who had stayed with *The Ark*. Then Baumstark posed a sombre question.

“I’ll need quite a lot of this stuff for the welding job. Can you get it?”

“That’s why I wanted to get you away from there before explaining my plan, Gerry,” Strike said. “I was afraid the Titanian might read your thoughts while I told you what I intend to do. We’ll have to scrape together every hypodermic syringe in *The Ark*, improvise some if we can’t find enough. Then back we go tomorrow. When the Time of Offering comes again, we enter and help ourselves.

“It must be done without the Titanians’ knowledge, of course. They’re too scared of their ‘inferior’ neighbors to risk any violation of their pact. And naturally we’ve got to give those little devils, the Gora, something to think about in the meantime.”

Excitement ran like electricity through the crew. Darkness came, blackly impenetrable. But hope, which had burned only as a dim spark, now flamed into a blazing beacon. With courage and skill, they might yet save themselves.

When dawn came, Strike laid out his plan of campaign. Gerry willingly let him take full command.

There were two proton cannon in *The Ark* itself, but they were huge. So Strike detailed one squad to remain with the ship, using the proton cannon to protect their final stronghold, in case the coming war should be carried to that extreme.

The last dregs of rocket fuel in the life-boats had now been used up, so the raid had to be carried out on foot. Eighteen of the crew, including Gerry and Strike, formed themselves in groups of three. One was equipped with hypodermics and containers for the vital fluid, the other two armed to the teeth. The rest of the men made a skeleton squad to be posted midway between *The Ark* and the city of the Titanians, prepared to fight a rear guard action if necessary.

“This may go off quietly, without a hitch,” said Strike. “I hope it does. But if we have to fight—and it’s our lives we’ll be fighting for—I mean to put up a real scrap.”

Timing their approach to arrive shortly before the morning Time of Offering, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike led their little party over the six miles of barren, trailless badlands and into the Titanian city. Though they were gripped by interest and excitement, their expressions demonstrated their grim determination to carry off the coup successfully. They knew the penalty for failure. It was death—if not by the Gora, then by scarcely less horrible thirst or starvation. There was little water on the satellite, and the food of the Titanians had proved unsuited to human consumption. They had to win or die.

Gerry was met by apparently the same Titanian trio who had entertained them the previous day. They were still as smiling and ingratiating as ever. A faint qualm stirred her conscience.

“My only real regret,” she said, “is that we can’t stay and uncover the secrets that lie hidden in this ancient city.”

“Don’t forget Kurtt,” reminded Tommy. “He must be a third of the way back to Earth by now.”

“I remember. But don’t worry about the race. We may not win, but it’s a foregone conclusion that Kurtt won’t, either.”

“Your inspired logic escapes me. However, I agree that there’s plenty around to interest us here. Too bad we can’t put off this job of having to fight for our lives. Maybe we can return some day and dig around a little. Yeah—maybe!”

The party was well into the occupied portion of the city. The Titanian began gently hinting by signs that he wished to communicate through the thought helmet. Strike quickly assigned each squad to a street-level apartment, urging them to be alert for the signal. Oxygen bottles were fastened to the men’s belts to leave their hands free. The dull booming sound of the gong came at once.

The Titanians as usual conveyed infinite regret that they should be forced to leave their guests. It was a rudeness that pained them deeply. Strike bowed and waved his hands understandingly, watched them disappear.

“Now!” he shouted.

The squads scattered on their assignments. Strike, Gerry and young Barrows darted into the nearest apartment. The Titanians had already composed themselves in their deep slumber.

Swiftly Gerry whipped out an enormous hypodermic and went to work. While Barrows held the container, she shot stream after stream of the sticky ichor into it, exsiccating the gland. Strike seized the smallest piece of furniture in the room, a queer device shaped somewhat like a piano stool. He strode to the hole in the floor and listened.

Like a distant waterfall came the rush of thousands of little feet. The miniature thunder rolled nearer and nearer. Then he heard something scrambling just beyond the limit of his vision in the black pit. A horrid snout poked sharply into view—

“Down you go!” shouted Strike.

He slammed down the stool-like contraption on the protruding head. The Gora vanished with an agonized hiss. The hole was completely blocked by the stool.

Gerry and Barrows glanced about apprehensively. Reassured by Strike’s confident grimace, they turned to the second sleeping Titanian. Underneath the stool the Gora was hammering and pushing, but they were no match for Strike’s weight and strength. One bony, needle-like tongue jabbed clear through the bottom of the obstruction. Strike promptly snapped it off with a vicious blow.

All over the city now, the sounds of uproar began. The Gora who had been blockaded had evidently spread the news. Enraged monsters were erupting from unclosed holes and converging upon the source of the disturbance. Just as Gerry started to work upon the third of the Titanians, four of the beasts rushed through the doorway, hissing with fury.

Strike calmly picked up a huge table and with one hand scaled it across the room. The resulting carnage gave him a lot of pleasure. He sat upon the up-ended stool, still blocking the hole, and drew two guns.

“What was that yarn about the tailor’s boy who killed seven with one blow? I’m not doing so badly myself.”

His heat-ray licked out once, twice. For the time being, six dead Gora effectively barricaded the entrance. Gerry hurriedly finished her work, tossed the hypodermic aside. Barrows sealed the precious can of fluid.

“All set?” asked Strike reluctantly.

As Gerry nodded, the reptilian tangle of dead bodies burst inward under a new assault. Gora began to steam in. Coolly the three began to fire, backing toward a window that led to the street. The deadly sniping quickly stalled the attack. The odor of burning flesh filled the room. The Titanians, aroused by the clamor, lurched about. Still half-asleep, they wrung their hands in futile distress.

Barrows slipped through the window first. His disappearance was marked by an exclamation of pain and anger. Gerry and Strike, piling through after him, found the lieutenant battling ferociously. Blood streamed from a slash across his forehead and welled slowly from two stabs on his left arm. He was encircled by twitching dead and dying Gora.

The remaining squads from *The Ark* were converging rapidly upon the central rendezvous, fighting deadly rear guard actions. Swiftly Strike counted his forces.

“Only seventeen!” he snapped. “Who’s missing?”

It was Kranz, a veteran of the Carlyle adventures from the very first expedition. Dead or not, he couldn’t be left behind. Without a backward glance, Strike asked which apartment Kranz had been in. Then he yelled a fierce battle-cry.

“Come on, gang. Let’s go!”

In a single mighty bound, he leaped clear over the encircling Gora and dashed for the indicated building. He vanished inside. After momentary hesitation, four of the crew jumped after him. The structure trembled with the fury of the battle within. Then Strike reappeared with the bleeding, semi-conscious Kranz over one shoulder.

The additional weight made it impossible for Strike to return by jumping over the enemy. His lips peeled back in a fighting snarl as he rushed with reckless fury, his two guns spitting deadly heat beams. For a minute the Gora seemed on the verge of overwhelming him. But just before they succeeded, they broke in confused panic before the advance of that terrible engine of destruction. They fled, hissing and squealing.

Strike and the others rejoined Gerry. Kranz still dangled over his shoulder.

“Now’s our chance,” panted Strike, between draughts from his oxygen bottle. “Make our run for it while they’re disorganized. Ready? What’s the matter with you?”

Gerry stood staring at Strike with her lips parted, her eyes shining. She was experiencing that strange emotion—a compound of awe, fright and admiration—that every woman knows when she sees the man she loves in two-fisted action.

“Anything wrong?” demanded Strike.

“No, Tommy,” she replied obediently.

“Then get going.”

“Yes, Tommy.”

Gerry led the way out of the city. They ran laxly, with the gliding, ground-hugging stride that saves energy and covers space on low-gravity worlds. They crossed the plain and were well into the hills, within sight of the small party waiting there, before the Gora took up the chase. Without pause, Gerry’s group kept right on going. It was their first and only duty to get the flux back to *The Ark*.

Twenty minutes of steady jogging brought them three miles of the way. Exhausted, they called a brief halt. Flinging themselves down on the ground, they sucked at their oxygen bottles avidly. But the bottles had been drawn upon heavily during the mad flight across Titan. Now they were nearly empty. Everyone made the discovery at once. Promptly they closed the valves, consciously forcing themselves to modulate their heavy breathing. It was not too successful. A dozen ordinary breaths left their lungs starving for oxygen.

Strike rose slowly.

“No time for rest, I guess. My fault for not caching a supply of bottles on the trail somewhere. Got to keep moving as long as possible. Save as much oxygen as you can for a final dash.”

They were still one-fourth of the way from the ship when the embattled rear guard caught up with them. Blue-faced from lack of oxygen, not one of them was without wounds. They had been trapped in a cul-de-sac and forced to storm their way out. Without oxygen reserves, and bleeding from cuts, they were staggering in the final stages of exhaustion.

Nor was there any respite at hand. In the near distance rose a towering column of dust in the breathless air, kicked up by hundreds of enraged Gora. The monsters stampeded along the trail to avenge the death of their kind and wipe out the intruders who threatened to upset their tight little economy.

As if the danger were not serious enough, the rear guard leader injected another menace into the situation.

“Our heat-ray guns, Miss Carlyle,” he gasped. “They’re running low. The beams are weak. Have any spares?”

A quick check-up showed that no one had any spares, and the guns of the main party were also found to be nearly exhausted. Strike shifted the burden of Kranz from one shoulder to the other.

“Well, Gerry, what do you do in that orange orchard of yours when the ants get as bad as this?” he asked.

“We put a patented device around the trunks of the trees, impregnated with something the ants can’t cross over,” Gerry said thoughtfully. “Sort of they-shall-not-pass strategy.”

She paused, trembling on the verge of an idea. They were approaching a narrow defile between steep cliffs. On the farther side of this would be the open plain leading to *The Ark*. If they could somehow block that defile—

“Of course!” yelled Strike. “We’ll give ’em a super-colossal hotfoot!”

Everyone stared at him as if he had gone insane. But he herded the party quickly down the canyon, stopping just beyond the narrowest part.

“With the remaining energy in our guns, we couldn’t begin to annihilate the Gora,” he panted. “But we can lay down an impassable barrier. Look!”

He aimed a continuous blast at the rocky canyon bottom. The lavalike stuff smoked faintly, began to glow. Finally it bubbled and heaved like a mud geyser as it became molten. The effort completely emptied Strike’s weapon. He cast it aside. But the others had caught on. Recklessly they poured their heat-rays along the rough rock floor, from one side of the passage to the other. They made a complete band about five feet wide, extending from cliff to cliff, of seething lava. When their guns were useless, the party withdrew to a safe distance to watch.

The vanguard of the Gora raced into sight, pouring down the narrowing V-shaped gap toward the bubbling ribbon of doom. When they were almost upon the boiling magma, the leaders skidded to a halt, hissing shrilly. But those behind were unable to see any reason for stopping. They piled into the leaders with irresistible momentum. All of them sank waistdeep in the molten rock. Squealing hideously, they writhed in brief torture.

A cloud of steam quickly rose, mercifully hiding the slaughter. Louder and shriller came the shrieks of the dying Gora as hundreds, blinded by the steam and their own insensate fury, rushed headlong to an awful death.

Strike, first to find his voice, yelled above the noise.

“Better move on, gang. That stuff’ll cool and some of ’em will get through.”

Tearing themselves from the horribly fascinating scene, the hunters walked slowly away. They reached *The Ark* without further incident.

Their first action was to fling themselves down the recreation room, seal themselves in tight, and literally bathe in blessed oxygen. Even Kranz, seriously though not fatally wounded, craved to saturate himself with oxygen before going to the infirmary. Breathing easily was the most important immediate reward of their victory.

For two Titanian days and nights, rotating shifts of eager workers kept the shriek of welding and the clangor of hammers going without ceasing. At decreasing intervals, marauding bands of Gora came snooping around. But a blast of the proton cannon quickly discouraged their taste for this sort of entertainment. The last few hours of labor were without interruption of any kind.

Finally the centrifuge was repaired and new plates had been installed to make the engine rooms air-tight once more. As Gerry prepared to depart, she felt a curious mixture of relief and reluctance.

She had no fear that the Titanians would suffer because of human interference. The Gora were, indeed, too dependent upon the Titanians to avenge themselves upon their hosts. But there was so much to be learned, so many mysteries unsolved, so great a story yet untold! She wished they could remain and solve the mysteries. Perhaps they could even assist the likable Titanians to break loose from the invisible chains which bound them to their parasitic masters.

Instead, though, they had to leave at once. There was the matter of Kurtt, and Von Zorn, and their livelihood was in the balance. Yes, there was a score to be settled here, and the sooner the better. Maybe they could return some time. But now—

Ports clanged shut. The rotors began to whine in rising crescendo to a thin whistle that passed beyond the range of human ears. *The Ark* trembled, then rose in a breath-taking swoop. There were some doubtful moments among the engineers as they apprehensively watched the results of their welding. But no signs of strain developed. The patched centrifuge seemed as good as new.

“Full speed ahead!” came Gerry’s command.

The Ark began to accelerate rapidly. Titan fell away, dropping to the size of a baseball, a marble, a pin-point of light that was ultimately obscured. Saturn itself began to shrink, as if being squeezed by the encircling rings. The ship began to approach a speed of thousands of miles per minute.

Still the relentless acceleration continued. There was no fuel supply to worry about. Gerry could call upon the almost infinite power of centrifugal force to drive them faster and ever faster through the vacuum of interplanetary space.

Gerry had no intention of coasting. Mechanical breakdown under the terrific drive was the only hazard. Carefully calculating the staying powers of her centrifuges under continual stress, she decided the risk was not too great, considering the prize at stake. So the speed was built up beyond anything ever achieved by ordinary rocket ships dependent upon atomic fuel. Jupiter loomed on the starboard, with its flock of scattered satellites, then quickly dropped behind.

Days passed into weeks as *The Ark* continued her furious rush through space. The asteroid belt presented its hazardous barrier. But Gerry, disdaining to go cautiously above or below, plowed straight through.

That was a hectic stretch, with alarm bells ringing and the ship’s lights dimming constantly as the repelling screen took the juice. But *The Ark* negotiated this cosmic blast and fled onward.

Finally the yellow-green speck that was Earth grew larger, easily visible as a disc to the naked eye. Worry began to seep through the crew as they neared the end of the journey. Despite their tremendous dash, they still had not seen any sign of Professor Erasmus Kurtt.

Had he already returned in triumph? If so, the belated appearance of *The Ark*, laggard and empty, would result in humiliation beyond endurance. Gerry’s hot-headedly taunting speech had burned all her bridges. She would be the laughing-stock of the System. Strike finally voiced his doubt.

“Seems to me, Gerry, we should’ve caught up to Kurtt by now. Maybe he’s already home. Or maybe he cracked up somewhere. Maybe we ought to’ve picked up another dermaphos on Saturn before leaving. Maybe—”

“Maybe you think Kurtt will win this race. I admit he must have pushed along pretty fast to have kept ahead of us this far. You can take my word for it, Tommy. We’ll find him utterly helpless, probably revolving around the Moon as a satellite.”

Strike gaped stupidly at this calm statement. But his astonishment was nothing compared with the emotion he felt when they came within telescope range of the Moon. They began decelerating with body-wracking speed for they had seen Professor Kurtt’s spaceship! Its glassed-in section was unmistakable. The ship was spinning futilely about the Moon in an eccentric orbit, elongated by the strong pull of Earth.

Strike turned toward his fiancée, demanding fiercely:

“All right, all right! Never mind the laughs. Explain this, will you? How did you know? What’s happened to Kurtt?”

Gerry controlled her delight long enough to elucidate.

“It’s so simple, Tommy. It all hinges on one of the first principles of our craft—study your specimens. Kurtt didn’t. He let us do all the work, then simply helped himself to a monster he knew nothing about. One thing he didn’t know was that the dermaphos needs uranium for its metabolism. He stored away a haphazard mess of vegetation for it to feed on, as we could see when he stole our dermaphos. But only a small percentage was that cabbage-shaped thing with the uranium salt deposits.

“Then he put our dermaphos in the glass showcase of his, where it was exposed to the full sunlight for many days. What happened? Well, the metabolism of the creature, accustomed to a minimum of sunshine, was stepped up tremendously. He became ravenous. He ate up all the vegetation and probably all the other Saturnian specimens in the hold. But a dermaphos can’t utilize this food without the catalytic assistance of uranium salts.

“He sensed the presence, probably by its radiation, of the Uranium Two-thirty-five in the nearby fuel hoppers. I know the construction of the type of ship Kurtt uses. Between the hold and the fuel hoppers, there’s only a light door. The dermaphos, growing more active under stimulus of the sunshine, can easily smash it. It doesn’t take much Two-thirty-five to operate a rocket ship, so the dermaphos finished it off in a few mouthfuls.

“Kurtt is left with just the fuel remaining in the firing chambers and feeder tubes, not enough to decelerate for a landing on Earth. The best he

can possibly do is fall into a braking orbit around the Moon, ultimately swinging around it as a satellite.”

Strike stared at Gerry in exasperation, resenting her omniscience. Yet she was apparently correct. If so, it was certainly a huge joke. He began to chuckle. “So that’s why you laughed when he took our dermaphos! Well, I hope you’re right, my girl.”

There was excitement when *The Ark* finally drifted past the Moon toward Kurtt’s helpless ship. Several private yachts and little sputtering spaceabouts were circling around like crows after a hawk. The space taxis traveling from Hollywood on the Moon to the big bloated gambling ships detoured so their passengers could get a look at the phenomenon.

They all scattered wildly as the mighty *Ark* eased into position beside Kurtt’s rocket.

“Kurtt will be having conniptions about now,” Gerry said. “He can’t win the race unless he returns under his own power, and he can’t do that unless he has someone bring him extra fuel. That, of course, would be contrary to the terms of the contest.”

Deftly she maneuvered alongside the glassed-in hold. It was empty of life, animal or vegetable. She had been right about the appetite of the dermaphos. Presently Professor Kurtt himself appeared at one of the forward portholes. He stared at *The Ark* like a murderer who looks upon the ghost of his victim. Stark terror bulged his eyeballs. Gerry motioned vigorously for him to go to the ravaged hold and arrange for the crew of *The Ark* to make contact there.

Kurtt refused in pantomime. Gerry casually pushed the button which automatically slid the proton cannon from the concealed ports. In full view, they pointed directly at the hull of Kurtt’s ship. Kurtt grudgingly obeyed. He appeared in a pressure suit and assisted his men in joining the two ships by the contact tube. Gerry led her crew into Kurtt’s ship. Fully dressed in pressure suits, they entirely ignored the ugly looks and mutterings from Kurtt’s men. She found her dermaphos in the fuel compartment.

Promptly she gas-bombed it into a coma, strapped the gravity plates around it, and transferred it to *The Ark*. The pressure there had once again been built up to resemble Saturnian conditions.

Then she peremptorily ordered Professor Erasmus Kurtt to come at once to the control room of *The Ark*. Kurtt came reluctantly, shucking off his pressure suit at Gerry’s command. The girl and Strike stood staring at him balefully in silence. Kurtt grew visibly more nervous by the moment.

“You’re taller than I am,” Tommy said at last. “Almost as heavy. It’ll be a fairly even match.”

Kurtt gulped and whined a feeble protest. Gerry cut him short.

“Just a question or two, Professor. You have any objections to our reclaiming our dermaphos? Laws of salvage, you know.”

Her voice was bitter-sweet, but Kurtt shook his head in mute fright.

“Do these jackals”—she waved at the bunch of curiosity-seekers hovering about—“know anything about what happened? Could they have seen the dermaphos? Have you communicated with anyone since you ran out of fuel?”

“N-no. No one knows anything. I was t-trying to f-figure out a way to get t-to Earth.”

The girl smiled in complacent satisfaction.

“That fortunate circumstance may save you a lot of grief. We might not even have to air this matter in a court of law. And now, Tommy? I think the rest of this case is in your department.”

Tommy escorted Kurtt into another room and closed the door. Faintly his words came through the door.

“You deliberately wrecked our ship in mid-space, stole the fruits of our labor, and calmly left us to die. Don’t get the idea that we don’t like you, Kurtt. We just think you’re a louse. This’ll hurt you more than it hurts me ___”

There was the sound of a hard fist striking bone. Then there was tumult. Gerry cocked an ear critically and turned to the visiphone to put in a call to Hollywood on the Moon. Von Zorn was not there, but the call was transferred to the California offices. Presently the simian features of the great Von Zorn—the little Napoleon of the film industry—glowered from the telescreen.

“So it’s you!” he snapped, staring at her under lowered brows. “From the reports I’ve been getting of such excitement at the Moon, I should’ve guessed as much.”

“Don’t you want to know what happened?” asked Gerry with suspicious sweetness.

“All right. So what goes on? Where’s that dog, Kurtt?”

Carefully sparing no single detail, Gerry told the story of Kurtt’s dastardly trick. Throughout the recital, Von Zorn’s face turned crimson, then pasty white, then a peculiar shade of puce.

“Lord!” he groaned, fully realizing what it might mean to him if the murderous behavior of his candidate became known to the public. “I—I— So help me, I didn’t authorize him to do any such thing as that. With me, it was supposed to be just a race, on the square. Honest!”

Gerry sarcastically enjoyed the spectacle of Von Zorn squirming and perspiring. Then she said regretfully:

“Yes, I know it was just Kurtt’s idea.”

The relief on the man’s face was comical.

“Well, then,” he barked, “I give up Kurtt. Of him I wash my hands. Absolutely—”

“Ah, ah. Not so fast. I know you don’t play dirty, but does the world know it?”

Von Zorn’s complexion was in a constant state of flux. Now it became pale again.

“But—but you wouldn’t break that story when it would ruin me unjustly! Come, now. I know you better than that. You’re too much of a lady!”

“I am not. And only one thing will prevent me from telling the whole story. I’ll let you have an armistice on my terms.”

“Why—why that’s blackmail!”

“It is, isn’t it?” she agreed pleasantly. “Are you going to pay!”

“Okay,” Von Zorn groaned. “So what’s the price?”

“A huge banquet in my honor tomorrow night. Tommy, the crew and I are to be guests of honor. You will be the host.”

Von Zorn buried his face in his hands at the thought of this humiliation.

“There must be flowers, motion picture celebrities, and newscasters,” Gerry continued remorselessly. “The speech of the evening will be made by you, eating humble-pie. You will stress the fact that not only have I brought home the dermaphos, but also your entry in the competition. I am bringing back Erasmus Kurtt—”

She turned as the door opened and Tommy Strike entered. He was slightly bruised. Behind him he dragged a shapeless bundle, which he laid at Gerry’s feet with the proud expression of a cat bringing something for its young. She examined the repulsive thing briefly.

“Yes.” Gerry turned back to the telescreen. “We’re bringing Kurtt back alive.”

Von Zorn moaned in protest.

“I can’t do it. It ain’t human. It’s cruel.”

Gerry was adamant.

“Yes or no? After all, I’m letting you down plenty easy.”

Von Zorn braced himself visibly.

“All right. This once maybe I can do it. But if it kills me from shame, I’d hate to live with your conscience.”

Gerry Carlyle and Von Zorn traded long, silent looks over thousands of miles of space, via the visiphone. Slowly Gerry smiled.

“You’re a pretty good loser, at that,” she said.

Von Zorn grimaced, remembering what Gerry could have done to him if she had been at all vindictive.

“And you’re not such a bad winner. But this is only one round. I ain’t lost yet. Next time, maybe, huh?”

Gerry smiled with scornful superiority.

“Just keep on swinging, little man. Some day you’ll learn you’re fighting out of your class. Well, see you tomorrow night.” She snapped the screen to darkness and turned to Strike. “And that is that.”

“Not quite,” contradicted Strike. “Have you forgotten the proper fade-out to every melodrama, after the forces of evil have been defeated and the villain properly thrashed?”

Gerry smiled tantalizingly. Tommy shoved the battered Kurtt aside with one foot and seized his fiancée. There was a struggle, but it was quite brief. It ended in a well known gesture of mutual affection between the male and the female of the human species.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Interplanetary Hunter* by Arthur K. Barnes]