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ASTONISHING

STORIES

JUNE



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JAMESON

HE
CONQUERED
VENUS

by JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

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HE CONQUERED VENUS

By
John Russell Fearn

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*Mark Tyme conquered the cannibalistic natives and the deadly jungles of Venus with ease, for all he needed there was strength and brains. But the "civilized" **Earth** conquered Mark Tyme!*

CHAPTER ONE

Back to Earth

A world on its toes. People in every country listening to their radios as stratosphere commentators kept a keen lookout for the ovoid expected from the depths of space. Newspapers splashing an inch-high headline:

MARK TYME RETURNS!

Captain Mark Tyme, earthly explorer par excellence, was returning from Venus after a five year conquest. The first man ever to go out into space and return in one piece. And what a piece! The newspapers and telecasts carried endless photographs of the redoubtable Captain, complete with bullet head shaven all over, pillar of a neck, open collar revealing a hairy forest of chest. He smoked Rope cigars in the wilds, wore a Deadrite watch on his thick wrist. . . Even his shorts were shown without a body and only a signature on the backs of slick magazines. Mark Tyme was a big shot, in more senses than one.

For five days now he had been expected, but to the people of 1980 five days was a drop in the bucket. Events moved so fast it seemed like five minutes. . . Then at 2:30 in the afternoon of August 6 the word was flashed from stratosphere to earth and rebounded over the world—

Mark Tyme's ship had been sighted!

Television transmitters swung to the ready and upon millions of screens there appeared a battered, sunlit silvery object like a cheap aluminum cigar case careering through the void.

New Yorkers gathered themselves for a supreme effort. Massed in tens of thousands throughout the city, noses in air and dark glasses on face, they scanned the blue heaven. The Mayor and civic authorities stood in an expectant, perspiring group on a bannered dais in the center of New York Airport, where the Captain had radioed that he intended to land.

The cheering from the myriads sounded like the explosion of a thousand steam safety-valves when the space ship was finally sighted. It came down on spouting rocket jets, incinerated a marquee in the process, and dropped with a none too comfortable thud to the grass north of the main landing field. The Mayor sucked his teeth in annoyance at finding himself a mile away from the point of welcome.

The people, sweeping over the police in their rush, flooded towards the machine, clamoring, yelling, waving rattles and blowing hooters.

The space ship remained motionless and the door failed to open. The police, recovering themselves, forced a cordon around the people and struggled to re-erect the tumbled barriers. The Mayor puffed down the roughly created passage between the throngs then stood in uncertain silence before the airlock, speech all prepared in his hand and trickles of moisture running down his face.

Evidently the Captain had been waiting for this blissful moment for the airlock opened now and he slowly emerged. Over six feet tall, nearly ebony black from the blistering radiations of Venus' near sun, he stood appraising the people. His faded topee was cocked on one side: under its brim his light blue eyes looked like marbles against his sun-blackened face. He wore the khaki shorts and shirt of his calling, and three belts. One for ray guns, of which

there were six; one for gun charges, of which there were hundreds; and one to keep his pants up.

In the stunned awe-stricken silence which followed his appearance a lone voice yelled out

—
“Three cheers for Mark Tyme!”

The Captain clasped his hands and waved them in the air over his head. His opening words were destined to go down to posterity. Sucking in a vast lungful of air he bawled them over the seething expanse.

“*Hi ya!*”

Microphones were suddenly superfluous. Tyme went on roaring with battering power.

“Thanks one and all for turning up to meet me and my boys”—he jerked his thumb to the sunburned men behind him. “We’ve seen Venus and we’ve brought back plenty.” He grinned hugely. “We faced dangers, sure—but Mark Tyme isn’t afraid of danger of any sort. . .” He patted his guns affectionately. “Now I—”

“One moment, Captain,” the Mayor broke in anxiously. “Do you mind if I make a speech of welcome?”

“Eh? Oh, no—sure. Here—come up!” Tyme reached down a hand like a dinosaur’s forepaw and lifted the Mayor bodily to the airlock. Dishevelled and embarrassed he began talking into the microphones—but he only managed four sentences before Tyme burst into a bellow of laughter.

“Aw, to heck with the speeches, Mr. Mayor! I’m a plain American, see, and I don’t like fancy work. I know I’m welcome: there’d be the hell of a row if I wasn’t. Space travel isn’t all that wonderful: just a matter of being strong enough and smart enough to take it—”

“Cars are waiting, Captain, to take you to the Administration Building,” the Mayor went on hurriedly. “Will you come along, or—”

“Sure I’ll come along! O.K., boys”—Tyme glanced back inside the ship—“grab the specimen cases!”

The crowd watched with interest as the Captain’s three comrades emerged with heavy packing cases on their shoulders. They descended to the grass, then Tyme locked the airlock’s combination switches from outside and turned to head the procession through the crowd. The Mayor and his men stumbled along in the rear trying to keep up with the vast strides.

With complete disregard for ceremony and upholstery Tyme had the cases dumped in the last of the six waiting cars. Then he took up his position in the first one. He remained standing, gazing round with hands on hips. He was still standing and shaking hands with himself over his head as the cars crawled like black slugs up banner-streamed Broadway. The contents of thousands of wastepaper baskets descended on his bullet head and were unheeded. He beamed through paper shreds and his voice boomed thanks to the rooftops.

The Mayor was heartily thankful when the cars drew up outside the Administration Building. Personalities of high society, members of the Upper Ten and Lower Five stood on plush carpets and gave mechanical smiles. Senators beamed stiffly over tight collars.

Beyond his historic “*Hi ya!*” Tyme took no notice of them and thereby ruined months of carefully planned rehearsal. Clanking like an armored knight he took the granite steps four at a time and marched into the vast entrance hall. Suddenly he came to a stop.

The hall was lined with guests, civic and high authorities specially contrived to extend cordiality.

“Say, what’s all this about?” Tyme swung to the Mayor.

“Reception party, Captain. Your rooms are ready for yourself and associates. Later, the banquet—”

“How much later? I’m hungry.”

The Mayor winced. “In about two hours.”

“Long enough, but I guess it will have to do. . .” Tyme glared round on the people, rubbed his nose uncertainly, then jerked his head towards the staircase. “Let’s go, boys,” he said briefly to his associates.

“But Captain, a few words—” The Mayor looked despairing.

“Fewer the better,” Tyme roared back. “Out in the spaces men don’t talk. They fight their way—they tear the living soul of space with their thoughts. They look at stars, not faces. They look on big things, not on folks who smirk and smile with hate in their hearts. Either Earth people have changed, or else I have. . . You mugs are here because it’s the right and proper thing to do. I’ve learned to ignore what’s right and do only what’s necessary instead. So—go home and hate me in private. I know what you’re thinking—that I’m loud-voiced and vulgar, that I never had any education, that I was an East side newsboy. So what? I conquered Venus, didn’t I? And that’s more than you could do! Later, mebbe, I’ll tell you more about it. . .”

“Mad!” the Mayor groaned, as he saw the shocked faces staring at the figures going up the staircase. “The man’s demoralized. Utterly and completely demoralized. . .”

CHAPTER TWO

Hero Worship

Despite the misgivings of the Mayor and the guests, the Captain turned up two hours later for the banquet in the vast dining hall, with his companions on either side of him. In a tuxedo he looked rather like a civilized West African, but from the way he boomed his observations as the meal proceeded there were some who wondered if he was even civilized. He addressed his remarks entirely to his associates. The table might have been empty of guests otherwise for all he seemed to care.

Only when the Mayor stood up to make his speech of welcome and thanks did Tyme look at the head of the table.

"In the past we have paid tribute to the men and women who have conquered air, sea, and stratosphere," the Mayor said. "We have let each pioneer see that we admire his courage and resource—but here we have a man—nay, men—of surpassing valor, men who braved the abysses of space to prove to us it is possible to go to another world and come back alive. Of Venus I can say nothing, not having been there—but of Earth I can say this: Captain Tyme, we welcome you. In the eyes of the world you are the greatest hero in history to date. . . Ladies and gentlemen, a toast—to Captain Mark Tyme!"

Tyme sat in silence while everybody drank, then he got to his feet and hitched a belt that wasn't there. Sucking in his breath as usual he bellowed:

"I'm obliged for all this welcoming stuff, but—" He broke off and moderated his voice. "Sorry," he apologized. "I got that way from shouting in Venusian jungles. Kind of hard to get out of it. . . Well, I suppose I'm expected to say a thing or two about what we did there, way out in space? I guess there isn't much to tell—not that you folks would understand anyway. Besides, you'll read the full reports and see the films we took. . . But I could tell you about swamps like sewers, that crawl with all the filth a devil ever put on a planet; I could tell you about heat that makes Death Valley look like the Arctic Circle; I could tell you of life that lives in trees, of strange animals just aching to feast on your giblets. I could tell you of the guts an Earthman needs to battle with them things—the kind we had to have to get back here alive. And for what?" Tyme looked round on the frozen faces. "If I'm keeping you folks up late, say so," he finished sourly, resting two ebony fists on the table.

"We are deeply interested, Captain," the Mayor hastened to assure him.

"Yeah? Maybe things look different from your side of the table. . . But I'll go on talking because I've things to do in my holiday here and I might as well get things moving by talking about them right now. . . Most of you folks are not interested in me—you're jealous at what I've done; but you might be interested in the souvenirs. I've brought back films, plants, chemicals, things to interest the scientific guys. That expedition put me back plenty in money and I'm going to clean up in return, or else. Also, I believe—"

"Tell me, Captain, is Venus populated?" asked a bewhiskered man at the foot of the table.

Tyme laughed shortly. "Yes, it's populated—by a race of bipeds, people on two legs like us. They represent the civilization of Venus, but they are about as civilized as our cannibals. Cunning little devils, worship pagan gods and things and barter in old stones. I sold 'em a pair of broken field-glasses for a handful of pebbles. . ."

“Perhaps,” said the hatchet-faced woman with glasses who represented the World Enlightenment League, “we might be able to do something about that? I mean, encourage these poor souls to the amenities of civilized life?”

“If you call it civilized to monkey around in a lot of boiled shirts and eat burned meat, you might at that,” Tyme admitted laconically.

“I was thinking of the value of them learning Latin!” the hatchet-faced woman retorted. “Such an uplift, you know. . .” She gushed all over the Mayor. “The poor people *must* be educated: it is our business as civilized people to raise them up—and up! Certainly I shall put the matter before my Committee.”

Tyme swallowed something. “Lady, if people in the past had stopped poking their noses in other peoples’ business under the excuse of uplifting them, there wouldn’t be a world with warlike nations today! You will start uplifting Venusians only over my dead body!”

“But, Captain, think of—”

“I am doing; and if you don’t mind I’ll get on with my talking. I want to get it finished and get outside for a chestful of air. I get kind of cramped inside. . .” Tyme glanced round. “If any of you ladies or gents here is interested in starting a new type of drink see me tomorrow morning. I’ve brought a chemical back from Venus which when mixed with water will knock your head off. It’s got a kick like a choked jet. . . I’d also like to see anybody who has an interest in flower shops. Botanists. I’ve some Venusian roots which give flowers shaped like dumbbells. They smell like hundred per cent carnation. On Venus there’s a hundred-mile carpet of them—hundred miles of dumbbells. Think of that. I tell you, folks, the place stinks.”

The Mayor coughed unnecessarily. Tyme looked at him sharply.

“Mr. Mayor, did I understand you to say that the rooms in this building are mine until I choose to scam out into space again?”

“Certainly, Captain. You have the entire freedom of the city, for that matter.”

“I don’t want the city; only the rooms. Just so as you gents who are interested in a spot of business will know where to find me. Make it tomorrow morning. . . And now”—Tyme kicked his chair back forcibly—“I’m out to grab a walk, to plant my feet on God’s solid earth for an hour or two. Thanks for the feast: I enjoyed it.”

He nodded briefly, glanced round with his cold eyes, then departed with long strides. The Mayor gave a sickly smile as he surveyed the astounded faces filing away on each side of him.

“We must forgive the Captain his eccentricities,” he muttered. “Venus, you know— After all, remarkable achievement!”

Nobody answered the observation directly. The party began to break up, divided into little groups to discuss the departed guest of honor. Then perhaps fifteen minutes later there came the sound of heavy boots in the marble hall outside and Tyme burst in, attired this time in open necked sports jersey and heavy tweed pants.

“Who the heck’s taken my hat?” he demanded, drooping a menacing eyelid.

“H-hat?” stammered the Mayor, astounded. “*What* hat?”

“My topee, of course! I always wear it. Worn it for five years and never wear anything else. And don’t start telling me it isn’t conventional in New York. I don’t give a hoot for convention: I want my hat. Somebody’s frisked it. It was on the table by the door and—”

Tyme stopped with dilated nostrils, then he glared round as a youngish woman emerged from the crowd of guests and looked at him demurely under her curling lashes.

“I—I took it, Captain.” Her confession came in a low voice. “I’ve always sort of—of admired you. In your pictures and things, I mean, and—I wanted a souvenir. We all wanted a

souvenir,” she finished boldly, looking at him with china blue eyes.

“*We*?” Tyme bellowed. “Who the heck’s ‘we’?”

“I’m talking about the Mark Tyme Girls’ Association. I’m the President, you see. I’m Monica Verity. My father is Dudley Verity, and I was born in—”

“Hang it all, girl, I don’t want a history book; I want my hat! And what in blazes is the Mark Tyme Girls’ Association? I never heard of it. . .”

“No, you won’t have. We formed it while you were away. About five hundred of us girls banded ourselves together and we meet twice a week to talk about you—I took your hat because *you* had worn it. Venusians had *touched* it! It is something sacred to us—so while you were upstairs with that manservant of yours I watched my chance, bobbed in your room, and took it. Oh, don’t you *see*?”

Tyme inwardly consigned Barrett, his associate, manservant, and second eye, to the devil.

“Where’s the hat now?” he snapped abruptly.

“Enshrined.” Monica Verity sounded ecstatic. “Our headquarters are a room in Talford Building, three hundredth floor. Your hat is there. I gave my best friend it to take away quickly. She was on the steps of the building outside. Right now, Captain, your hat will be under a glass dome on top of a little pedestal. Now we can all revere it. . . You don’t really mind, do you? There are plenty of topees, but only one that we can cherish. I—I was going to ask you to come and address us girls. We’d so like to have our hero with us for an hour. . .”

“Five hundred girls? Me?” Tyme gave a visible tremor. “Thanks all the same, Miss Verity—but I’d sooner you kept the hat. All the same, I wish—Aw, heck! Guess the best thing I can do is step out and buy me a new lid.”

He turned back to the doorway and vanished in the hall.

“Can you beat it?” he asked the granite-faced commissioner. “A kid pinches my hat and puts it under a glass cover so she and a lot of other dames can worship it. . . Just gives you an insight onto what fame can do to a guy, doesn’t it?”

The commissioner sucked his teeth. “I seem to recall my old lady kept cheese under a glass cover too,” he said—but because he was so big Tyme stepped out into the street without saying a word.

It seemed to Tyme that the ardor of the populace in general had cooled a good deal next morning—but for the life of him he could not figure out why. So far as he knew he had said nothing offensive. It puzzled him too why all his colleagues—excepting Barrett—had left him to his own devices in order to return to their families until he should need them again for a further expedition. Barrett had no place else to go anyhow.

Slamming down the morning papers, Tyme said grimly, “I don’t-like these headlines, Barrett! One says ‘Is Tyme a Nut’? Another describes me as ‘The Admirable Piecan’. Still another seems to think it’s hellish funny to have a topee under a glass dome three hundred floors from the ground. Do *you* think it’s funny?”

“Hardly that, sir. A trifle unusual, perhaps—but not funny. After all, you know what newspapers are. Always jealous of great men. . .” It was not by accident that Barrett had been in Tyme’s employ for fifteen years.

“Damn fools, all of ’em!” Tyme snorted. “Sooner we take off on another expedition and the better I’ll like it. All a matter of getting the money to do it. We’ve got to sell those plants and minerals, Barrett.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, you could make a vast fortune if you cared to sell the formula for your space ship fuel and the design of the ship itself. You—”

“And have Governments strangling each other to fly into space and frisk worlds? Not if I know it! I’m the only guy with the key to space right now, and until I pass out it stays my property. I prefer first claim.”

Barrett’s haggard expression showed he was thinking, then he turned to the door at a sudden knock. It was a tall, elegant individual with hair matching his french-gray suit who came in. He walked so elegantly he was nearly a female impersonator.

“Ah, Captain. . . !” He held out his hand warmly. “I am Cornelius Vanhart, President of the International Beverage Corporation. I was present at the banquet last night. . . You mentioned a chemical drink.”

“Sure I did. Grab yourself a seat.”

Tyme paced slowly round the room as Vanhart complied. Barrett, understanding mystic signals, vanished in the neighboring room and came back with a phial of salts and a glass of water.

“Here we are, sir!” Tyme swept them up and nearly spilt water on the immaculate trousers. “The fizzwater of the gods—and then some!” The water boiled like hell as he emptied a few salts into it. “There you are. Drink that. . . The stuff’s dynamite. If you buy the formula you’ll have every other fizzwater king by the schnozzle.”

Vanhart sipped experimentally, smiled fatuously, and sipped again. He ignored the bubbles that fell and popped on the unmentionable pants. He took longer sips—gulps—swallowed the glass’ entire contents. He handed the glass back then slapped his knees violently.

“I have the pronounced conviction that I am flying,” he observed at length. “Flying—flying—”

“A bottle full of this and you’d be the China Clipper,” Tyme grinned.

“But, Captain, so confoundedly odd. But confoundedly pleasant— Ah! The telephone!”

“That’s no telephone; just bells in your ears. The chemical reacts on the brain, see? It doesn’t make you intoxicated. It produces a state of perfectly sober merriment. You’re drunk, but you’re not—that’s the advantage. You sort of feel you’d like to hop out and ring the President’s doorbell. What’s more, the more you have the more you want. Get it? Business without end?”

“And when this—this supply of chemical is exhausted?” Vanhart beamed like a searchlight.

“It’ll never be exhausted! It is basically carbon, and you can duplicate its makeup from earthly chemicals without any effort, without any end. It just happened to form in this combination on Venus, and you’d work a million years before you’d hit the right combination here. I’m willing to sell this chemical—and your own chemists will soon work out the full formula. I’ve a rough formula made by my own men I’ll sell as well. That’s fair trading.”

“How much do you want?”

Vanhart still played mute tunes on his knees.

“Two million dollars—and you can afford it. If you’re not interested I know plenty who will be. If nobody is interested I’ll start myself and wipe the rest of you out of business. Lemonade, beer, wine, ‘Angel’s Kiss,’ ‘Satan’s Eyeball,’ and all the rest— They’ll go out like a light!”

Vanhart only beamed all the more. “Two million dollars? Cheap enough. I’m in no mood to argue. Pleasure—that’s my idea. Give pleasure to everybody. Make my Board of Directors

dance with merriment. That's what I'll do. Get me the rest of this mineral."

Tyme thrust the phial in the waving hand. He flipped his fingers and Barrett retreated and returned with a hastily scribbled formula. That went in the other hand. Vanhart stuffed both in his pockets, smoothed the heavenly trousers, then snatched out his checkbook abruptly. Tyme watched in silence as the fountain pen flew over the mottled paper.

"There!" Vanhart handed it over and got to his feet. "The legal document will follow later in the day. I'll attend to it. . . Thanks for the flight!" He turned uncertainly to the door and went out, chuckling over an obscure joke.

"I suppose," Barrett said doubtfully, "you did right in giving him the stuff, sir? It makes a person so happy they can't be responsible for their actions. Do you think—?"

"I got two million dollars, didn't I?" Tyme snapped. "And the analysis of that chemical will show it's all I claim it to be. I told the truth, and you know it. If the drink made him give two million without even trying to bargain, that's his look out. . . That's victory number one. Two million will see us well away. Better go cash it into bonds, securities and notes before it gets stopped. You never know."

"Right away, sir. . ."

But evidently Vanhart was entirely satisfied, for during the afternoon—by which time the effect of the water must certainly have evaporated—he forwarded the legal interpretation of the transaction and even added a note of thanks. The chemists were satisfied. Vanhart proposed launching Venusfizz within a week. He nearly drooled over the possible profits—so much so indeed that the faint pricks in Tyme's conscience changed to a gathering doubt as to whether he had charged enough. The thought that he had perhaps gypped himself was too horrifying to contemplate. . .

It so happened, however, that he had little time to think about the matter further. His belief that the public had forgotten all about him was dispelled completely when he received an earnest deputation from the exhibitors handling his film of Venusian life. Would he make a personal tour with the film? Would he—and this nearly demanded knee-bending—be gracious enough to start that very evening? A stratospherical fee would be paid, of course. Would he mind being in full exploring kit even to the portable stove?

He agreed. Complete with three belts, shorts, khaki shirt, and several odd hundred pounds of accoutrements, the old original indeed except for his new topee, he appeared that night at the Astoria. He boomed and roared his way through a commentary on his film, filling the great hall with his thunderous tones. The film did more to offset the offensive notions of the news reporters and scandalized guests of the previous night's banquet than anything else.

The general public took this sunburned tough egg to their hearts. He was sensational, eccentric, a strong man, an idiot, and a genius—all depending on where you sat in the hall.

For his own part he was fairly certain that the first three rows of the cinema were filled with five hundred young women who never took their callow eyes off him all the time he ranted. They never seemed to look at the picture. Some of them even took notes. . . By the time he had worn himself hoarse and retired to the dressing room backstage, he found the room filled with all manner of weird gifts. There were flowers without end—some inscribed "To the divine Captain." Somebody with misguided wit had sent an enormous onion to which was tied a label. It said "This smells. Figure it out." And there were chocolate boxes, horseshoes, miniature space ships made out of almond paste and coconut, cards, boxes of cigars, pairs of socks—

“The place looks like a chain store!” Tyme snorted at last, slamming the door. “Get this damned junk outa here. Give it to the orphanage, or something. . .”

CHAPTER THREE

Business Dealings

For some time he stood watching the bell hops sweeping up the stuff into their arms; then he turned as the door opened cautiously and Monica Verity came in slowly. Behind her in the passage loomed the grinning, snickering four hundred and ninety nine.

Tyme glanced helplessly at Barrett, then back to the girl. Automatically his gaze shot to her hat. He hadn't seen it in the darkened theater. It was a topee—a small, ridiculous little topee perched on one side of her blonde hair. He just couldn't take his eyes off it.

"Captain, we wanted—wanted to express our appreciation for tonight," she said coyly, and pursed her red lips so much Tyme wished to God he were a younger man. "You were divine—just as we'd always imagined you would be. In that kit, I mean. . ." She looked at his blocklike legs and massive, knotty arms.

He said gustily, "Oh, that's O.K. I—"

"There's something else I wanted to tell you, Captain. We've started a movement to commemorate your exploration. You see, I'm sort of—of a fashion plate—socialite, I think they call me. What I wear is usually copied, so I had this little hat modeled after yours. Now all the girls will wear one. . . ! Don't you think that's marvelous?"

"Yeah—marvelous." Tyme made the admission uncomfortably. "I guess it's a swell idea—better than those soapdishes and fried eggs you girls usually stick on your noodles. . . You mean all the Association is going to wear topee hats?"

Monica Verity looked surprised. "Oh, not just the Association—every smart woman and girl in this country—and Britain, and France. We've done our part to commemorate your voyage, Captain. . . All we want you to do now is sign this letter."

"Letter?"

She produced a sheet of typewritten paper from her ornamental bag and gave it to him to read. It was pretty much the same as the endless letters he had signed for socks, cigars, and suspenders.

"I think Topee Hats are the last word. No smartly dressed woman can afford to be without one. The fashion has my fullest and complete approval. Signed. . ."

"Simple enough, isn't it?" Monica smiled naively.

Tyme nodded as he signed it and handed it back. She gave him another wistful look with her big eyes, then went out quietly and joined the other girls. Talking among themselves they retreated down the corridor.

"Peculiar young lady, sir," Barrett observed thoughtfully. "I thought at first she was young and shy, but now I dare to wonder if—"

"Yeah, you might well wonder!" A languid figure strolled through the doorway and pushed up his soft hat. "I'm Taylor of the *Voice*. Captain. I'd like a personal angle on your reactions to Earth. And say—you know who that dame is, don't you? That Monica Verity?"

"A socialite, she said."

Taylor grinned. "Well, yes, I guess that's right, but she's also the chief buyer for her father's millinery establishment—biggest in town. She's a socialite, sure—always hunting for

new hat ideas. You know—what Verity wears today the world wears tomorrow.”

“But—but she’s only a kid!” Tyme exploded. “A kid with a bad hero-complex.”

“Thirty years of kid,” Taylor observed. “Cosmetics have upped a bit while you’ve been away, Cap. Putting it bluntly, I’d say you gave her the exclusive right of using your hat for a model by signing that letter. Now you can sit back and watch hat designers go cross-eyed trying to keep up with things. . .”

“It’s an outrage!” Tyme exploded. “I won’t have my hat worn by women. It’s effeminate! It reflects on me! I’ll break up this Mark Tyme Girls’ Association! I’ll force that girl to—”

“You can’t.” Taylor was infuriatingly calm. “This is New York, and we’ve got laws—of sorts. You signed away your hat and the admiration stunt was just build up. Monica Verity is sort of slick that way until you get wise to her. . . And there isn’t such an organization as the Mark Tyme Girls’ Association. Those girls were probably part of her staff, put there to help the deal through.”

Tyme sat down with a thud. The ironmongery on his back forced him to rear bolt upright.

“There ain’t no justice,” he muttered. “Now I come back to Earth I’m made a fool of—made to look like a cheap adventurer. I risked my life out in space, and what do I get for it? I get played for a sucker.”

“That’s life,” Taylor admitted pessimistically; then with sudden keenness, “But I’m prepared to give you a real build-up, Cap. I want to show the world the *man*, not the loud voiced buffoon the world thinks you are. . .”

Tyme got slowly to his feet again, his massive jaw set like a rock. “*What did you say?*” he asked, with volcanic calm.

Taylor moved hastily. “That’s what the *world* thinks, Cap—not me. I think you’re swell —”

“*You* think I’m swell, and every paper in the blasted city plasters headlines about me being a nut?” Tyme bellowed. “You’ll only make it worse with your damned personal angle. Give a guy a free meal, then make his face red forever, eh? Not if I know it! *Out!*”

“But look, I can help you—”

“And I can help *you!*” Tyme’s hands shot out. Before he could get to the doorway Taylor found himself lifted by pants and collar and hurled outside like a cannon ball. He crashed into the midst of the officials and scattered people who had gathered in the passage preparatory to entering the dressing room.

Tyme himself appeared in the doorway and glared round.

“Well, what in heck do you people want?”

“You remember me?” A woman with hatchet face and gleaming glasses squirmed out of the gathering. “The World Enlightenment League? I’ve seen my Committee and we wondered if you would finance an expedition of ten space ships to carry us to Venus. My committee agreed with me that the natives of Venus should learn civilized ways and means. . .”

“On how to two-time an honest man doing his best for progress, eh?” Tyme inquired sourly. “Well get this, lady. . .” He advanced so suddenly that she cowered back. “I wouldn’t finance a row of salmon tins for you or your outfit. What’s more, if you were a man I’d kick you downstairs. *Now get out!* The whole two-faced lot of you!”

The effect of the blast was sufficient to send most of the gathering, Hatchet Face included, scattering like chaff—but one remained, a smallish man with a huge flower in his buttonhole.

His cheeks were floppy, his eyes large and moist like those of a Peke. His hair dripped brilliantine.

Tyme narrowed one eye and hitched his belts.

“Maybe you didn’t hear what I said?” he asked with a grave calm.

“Oh, I heard,” the man admitted nervously. “But—but I’ve come to talk business. Here’s my card.” He darted out with it and darted back. Tyme scowled at the pasteboard.

Fortesque J. Gillibrand
Horticulturist
Times Square N. Y. C.

“You mentioned a plant at the banquet. I’d like to know all about it. Buy it if possible. . .”

Tyme hesitated briefly, then nodded. “O.K., Mr. Gillibrand. Come back with me and I’ll show you everything. If I seemed sort of rude with those other mugs don’t let it bother you. They think I’m a fool.”

“Quite—quite,” Gillibrand said ambiguously—then he became quiet as with Tyme on one side and Barrett on the other he was whirled through the rear exits to a waiting car.

To Tyme, there was something repulsive about the way Fortesque Gillibrand finicked around the flower pot containing the Venusian weed. With hands like a manicurist he flicked the little tendrils, toyed with the delicate buds. He monkeyed about with forceps, magnifying glasses, and sap-extractors. He sniffed and squinted and meditated—then said,

“One hundred dollars.”

“Ha!” Tyme laughed derisively.

“Well, a hundred and fifty. . .”

“One thousand and not a cent less,” Tyme snapped. “Don’t you realise that this plant will grow like a grape vine in earthly soil? Grow infernally fast too. This is Venusian swamp soil in this pot, but put these roots in earthly loam and— Boy, they’ll spread like chain lightning. I proved that on Venus when I transplanted some into a box of earth soil. Something to do with earthly nitrates, according to my pet botanist on the expedition. . .”

“But a thousand dollars! A thousand dollars for a weed!”

“Orchids and edelweiss are weeds, but their rarity makes ’em valuable. Compared to this stuff in the pot edelweiss is as plentiful as clover. For the exclusive right of using Venus Dumbells I want a thousand dollars. And if I bring any more back you can have ’em free. Nobody else—just you. Take it or leave it.”

“Of course I could graft. . .” Gillibrand meditated. Then he looked up. “I’ll advise you in the morning. I must think about it. . .”

“O.K., but if anybody else turns up I shan’t hold it for you.”

Gillibrand turned to the door, then he swung back and clicked his teeth.

“You make it too irresistible, Captain!” he exclaimed, yanking out his check book. “I’ll take it. . . You are perfectly sure it won’t die when transferred to earthly soil?”

“Not a chance! I’ll sign a guarantee to that effect if you want. Money back if dissatisfied, you know. . .”

Gillibrand nodded as he handed the check over. “I’ll send a guarantee for your signature tomorrow. . . Thank you, Captain—thank you.” He cuddled up the pot Barrett had wrapped up for him and went out eagerly.

“Hell!” Tyme gave a sniff like a vacuum cleaner. “Open that window! Place smells like a cheap actress. . . Well Barrett, my lad, that makes two million one thousand dollars. Call the thousand expenses. And I guess that’s about all we’ve got to sell.”

“I still think something might be done with Miss Verity, sir,” Barrett pondered. “She got exclusive rights to imitate your hat without it costing her anything beyond eye-rolling. I think by the exercise of a little legal strategy I could make her pay something. If I have your permission to. . . ?”

“Go to it—first thing in the morning,” Tyme nodded. “I’d like to take the wind out of that dame’s sails. Once we’ve finished that I guess we’re all set for another expedition. . .”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Conquered Hero

When Tyme had dressed and arrived for breakfast next morning he found everything ready on the table, with a brief note. Barrett had departed to execute legal strategy. Tyme started on his egg, glancing at the morning paper—then he forgot all about the egg in a sudden rush of fury. The paper—the *Voice*—had the headline devoted to reporter Taylor’s article—

WHY DOES MARK TYME MARK TIME?

Wading through a resumé of the Captain’s fêting since his arrival back on Earth, the article went on with vitriolic fury to explain how Taylor had been kicked out the previous night. Taylor averred, just within the law of libel, that the Captain was a fraud, that he was a guest of the taxpayers and openly gypped and insulted the citizens in return.

Matters like fizzwater, where he could be sure of a return, he had been eager to pursue—but where it meant him giving money for advancement, as in the case of the World Enlightenment League, he had threatened violence. And what sort of a trick was he trying to play on poor, innocent Monica Verity, a young girl who just worshipped him? Curious how Taylor had amnesia regarding Monica’s true profession.

“. . . and we have got to know why Mark Tyme continues to mark time,” the article concluded. *“We are not keeping him if he is anxious to start off on another expedition. The least a conquering hero can do is to be civil.”*

Tyme swallowed rage and breakfast together. Then he snatched up the telephone and spent a busy fifteen minutes contacting the rest of his associates. In each case he got a similar answer. None of them was ready to follow out his orders and leave for space again within two days. They wanted a month’s rest and enjoyment before they would be at his service once more. . .

It was not surprising then that Barrett found a very disgusted employer when he returned, rather sheepishly, around dinner time.

“Well?” Tyme looked up rather despondently.

“I regret, sir, that I have to report failure.” Barrett looked crestfallen. “I saw an attorney, sir, and it seems you have no chance of forcing Miss Verity to pay anything for the use of your topee. That endorsement you signed for her was sufficient legal guarantee of your approval of the whole thing. . . I am deeply sorry, sir.”

“Oh, forget it!” Tyme growled. Getting to his feet he went moodily to the window. “Like the rest of ’em she’s a twister. . . They’re rotten, Barrett—everybody’s rotten. The bigger you are the more they soak you. Even our own boys aren’t anxious to take my orders any more. I had sort of figured we could take off again in a couple of days—get away from this damned planet into the peace of space. They want a month.”

“Well, frankly, I can’t blame them. . . However, if you wish it, sir, I will have the ship loaded up with five years’ provisions and give the necessary orders for fuel manufacture. We can afford it now. We may as well be ready. . .”

“Yeah—you’d better do that.”

Tyme lighted a cigarette moodily—then swinging round he snatched up the *Voice* again and ripped it savagely into shreds, finally flung himself in a chair to browse over the delights of being a hero.

If Taylor had sought to stir up public opinion against Tyme by his leader in the *Voice*—which was followed by others of even more violence in the ensuing days—he certainly succeeded.

Tyme found himself left alone in the Administration Building. The officials were perfectly polite, but they left no doubt about the fact that they would not object to vacating of the rooms whenever convenient. Which only served to make Tyme all the more determined to stay in them—at least until the month was up and he could collect his crew for departure into space again.

Certainly he was convinced that fame was not worth having. He kept to his rooms most of the time, only seeing people who desired to add his name to advertisements. For such privileges he demanded stunning fees—and got them. He began to appear in all sorts of magazines in all kinds of different attires, advertising anything from shoes to skyscrapers.

He noted too, with a sort of detached interest, the furore being caused by the arrival of Venusfizz and topee hats simultaneously. In the smart magazines his own endorsement of topee hats appeared with utter shamelessness. He read too of passionate outbursts by New York, London, and Paris hat designers against the craze. Women, from the servant girl to the highest in the land, were bending to the fashion of the topee hat—and because Verity's possessed the original exclusive design it seemed likely that dozens of lesser designers would find themselves in bankruptcy unless they found a way round the problem.

Tyme began to receive shoals of impassioned entreaties, urging him to use his influence to make the concession of topee hat design apply to other designers as well. He refused for the simple reason that he was powerless to go back on his word. Hat designers began to call at the Administration Building. Men and women in scores insisted on seeing him, threatened prosecution because he had refused to deal with a new creation in the correct trade fashion.

It gave him a sour pleasure to see a few people smarting at last.

With the case of Venusfizz he was faced with a different sort of problem. Manufacturers of fizz water, distillers, and brewers rose to heated action. The *Voice*, eager for details, published the glaring fact that Mark Tyme had deliberately ruined the drinking trade of the world. He had sold a secret to Vanhart of the International Beverage Corporation: Vanhart was likely to make millions out of it, and because of the druglike effect of the drink would continue to do so forever. Yet, by legal statute, Tyme had had no right to sell his formula without first getting the assent of the Board of Beverages.

Far from having their assent he did not even know they existed. Before he realised what had happened he found a summons slapped in his hand: and not an hour after it he got a second one. The hat designers had found a clause whereby they could sue him for fraudulent conversion of trade rights. That was what they called it, anyway.

“This,” Tyme bellowed, waving the summons in the air, “is gratitude! First one—then the other. But they won't get away with it, Barrett! If they want me that badly they can chase me into space. I'm having nothing to do with it. These cases will frisk me of all the money I've cleaned up. . . I'm going to make the boys see reason and leave early if it's the last thing I do. You'd better come with me.”

He slammed on his topee and led the way to the door. Barrett followed discreetly behind him. Glaring as he strode along, Tyme went down the main street amidst the shoppers and walkers, thumbs tucked by habit in the edges of his revolver belt. He took no notice of the various glances cast towards him.

“We’ll try Chris first,” he snapped out at length. “We can cut across Times Square. No use talking to the boys on the phone. They only understand one language, and it’s this!” He doubled his mighty fist.

He stopped at the traffic lights, waiting for the change in signal—but before it came he was aware of a wild hubbub from somewhere on his left. It was followed immediately afterwards by a smashing and slamming of glass and the shriek of a man.

“What in—?” His hands flew automatically to his guns—then he turned and raced with Barrett and the people along the sidewalk, stopping at last before a shattered shop front. Women screamed, men shouted, police turned purple blowing whistles. Tyme slid to a stop and shot Barrett an astounded glance.

Thrusting through the broken window, the struggling form of a man in its tendrils, was a titanic green arm—the arm of a plant, its buds shaped like dumbbells. Even as the baffled people watched the arm grew.

“It’s—it’s Gillibrand!” Barrett gasped in horror, as the suspended man raised a limp and sweating face for a moment. “That plant you sold him. Earthly soil. . .” Barrett stopped, looking at the name “Gillibrand” over the broken window.

“Hell. . .” Tyme whispered, watching the twining green. Thing must have grown like the devil in the passing days. Then at that moment Gillibrand caught sight of him and uttered a hoarse shriek.

“He sold me this! Him—Captain Tyme! It’s a mad plant—been growing and growing out in the back conservatory. Can’t kill it!—Ouch!”

Gillibrand finished with a shriek as the sappy branch holding him snapped precipitately and dropped him with a resounding thud on the sidewalk—but like dense ivy speeded up a hundred times the ropy arm of vegetation began crawling steadily up the building block, exuding a swimmy, sickening odor of heavy acacia.

The people swung round and regarded Tyme with grim eyes. The police too prepared themselves and tugged out their guns—but in that instant Tyme’s hands flashed to his own guns and leveled them.

“O.K.,” he said bitterly, Barrett behind him. “Come one step towards me and I’ll blast the living daylights out of you. I mean it! How the heck was I to know that the weed would do *that*? I knew it grew fast—but not *that* fast. You can’t blame me for it—any more than you can blame me for bringing new drinks and new hats to public notice—”

“You’ve been a public nuisance ever since you came back, Tyme,” snapped one of the officers. “It’s our job to run you in as a desperate character.”

“Yeah? Try it!” Tyme grinned bitterly. “I’m through, you hear? Through! I’ve done my best and you’ve all tried to gyp me for it. O.K., I’ll go somewhere else. . .”

He backed away as he spoke, said briefly to Barrett, “The airport. Only half a mile away. Got to run for it.”

“But the rest of the boys—?”

“To hell with ’em. We’ll manage. Return later maybe, in secret. You loaded up with provisions and fuel?”

“Yes, I—”

“Right. Let’s go!”

Tyme swung suddenly, plunged into the midst of the crowd behind him with such force that they bowled backwards before the onrush. By the time they had recovered their balance he was streaking like a trackrunner down the sidewalk, able to move at demoniacal speed through long practise. He whirled Barrett along beside him with one hand on his collar.

Twisting and dodging, ignoring the blaring of traffic as he tore across main streets, the hero of Venus pelted like the wind from the yelling throng pursuing him. He was not even panting by the time he and Barrett plunged to the airfield. Barrett was not panting either; he was half dead.

Without a pause Tyme went straight on, reached the airlock of his space machine and twisted the combination screws. He hurled Barrett through the opening like a sack of coals, clambered in himself as the crowd surged onto the field. A police officer’s flame gun charge struck the massive door futilely as it closed.

One flick of the buttons and the rockets roared into life. Instantly the crowd pressed back before the blasting, searing discharge. Within the ship Tyme stood looking down on the people as he hurtled the vessel upward to the clouds.

“Appear in court!” he breathed venomously. “Responsible for a mad tree! Been made a sucker of all along the line. . . Forced to leave a cool two million dollars behind—but it’s in my name and nobody can touch it. One day I may collect. . . The conquering hero! Guess it’s the last time we try and become prophets in our own country, eh, Barrett?”

Barrett nodded slowly, recovering himself. “I agree with you, sir. Though it will be difficult without a full crew, I do believe the solitude of space is preferable to the solitude of a cell.”

Mark Tyme turned to the instruments which plotted out the course.

THE END

[The end of *He Conquered Venus* by John Russell Fearn]