

THE
ENERGY EATERS

ARTHUR K. BARNES

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THE ENERGY EATERS

A Complete Novelet

By ARTHUR K. BARNES and HENRY
KUTTNER

Nothing in the Solar System Daunted Gerry
Carlyle—Except Hollywood on the Moon!

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CHAPTER I

Storm Over Gerry

Nobody knows exactly what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable body. Science, with a view to solving that bewhiskered problem, had been eagerly watching the feud between Nine Planets Films, Inc., and Gerry Carlyle, the Catch-'em-Alive damsel. But so far honors had been about even, though Gerry's hot temper had become even fierier under the strain, and Von Zorn, president of the great motion picture company, had been under a doctor's care for some time.

At the moment he was sitting behind his gleaming glass desk and twitching slightly as he glared at Anthony Quade, ace director and trouble-shooter extraordinary for Nine Planets.

"Look," he said in a deceptively soft voice, "I don't ask for much, Mr. Quade. Just a little cooperation from my staff. All I want is a signature—two short words on this contract. That's not too much to expect from a billion dollar organization with the cream of the System's technical and promotional brains, is it?"

Quade settled his large, big-boned body more comfortably in the chrome-and-leather chair and blinked

sleepily. Von Zorn changed his tone and his voice quavered slightly as he went on.

"I'm a sick man, Tony. I can't stand this continual worry. Somehow I don't think I have long to live. My heart. And all I ask you to do is get a signature on this contract."

"A great act, Chief," Quade said approvingly. "But I've heard it a few dozen times before. I think I'm allergic to your heart. Every time you get *angina* I find myself dodging Whips[*] on Venus or shooting energy-storms on Mars. I need a vacation."

[*] A giant carnivorous reptile, somewhat resembling *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

"Afraid?" Von Zorn asked tauntingly.

"Sure," Quade said. "I've fought haywire robots from Pluto; I've handled the worst temperaments on the Moon; I've even brought you pix of the Martian Inferno. But I positively won't risk my life with that—that Roman candle in skirts."

"Think of the box-office!"

"I know. It's worth millions to have Gerry Carlyle tied up in a contract so she won't go off and bring back a cargo of Martian monsters for the London Zoo every time we shoot a

Mars epic with robots. I don't like it any better than you do, Chief. That dame scoops us every time—and the public won't look at our robots when they can see the real thing. I can see myself asking Gerry Carlyle to sign that contract."

Von Zorn hesitated. "Tony, I'll ask her myself. Only—"

"Only what?"

"She won't sign."

Quade nodded, frowning. "We've got nothing she wants. You can offer her a fortune and she'd still say no. The only—wait a minute!"

Von Zorn tensed. "Got an idea?"

"Maybe. Gerry Carlyle will sell her soul for one thing—a new monster. Something nobody's ever captured or even seen before. Jumping Jupiter, I've got it! If she'll make a flicker for us, we'll give her the beast for her Zoo."

Von Zorn said, "And just where do we get this beast?"

"Just leave that to me. I've plenty of technical resources in the labs."

"If you're thinking of a synthetic monster—"

"What I'm thinking of will surprise you," Quade said mysteriously. "Give me thirty days, and I'll get you a beast that'll make Gerry Carlyle turn green. Chief, she'll be begging you to let her sign that contract!"

Grinning, Quade went out, leaving Von Zorn licking his lips at the prospect of a defeated and supplicant Gerry Carlyle.

* * *

It was bedlam. Newscaster men swarmed in the office; photographers snapped their flash-bulbs continually; questions and shouts filled the place with babel. Through it all the central figure posed gracefully against the massive desk, cool and unperturbed as an iceberg.

She was dressed in mirror-polished high boots, riding pants, and polo shirt open at her tanned throat; these were the badges of her profession. For this was the New York office of Gerry Carlyle, grim huntress of fierce monsters on the inhospitable planets of the Solar System, serene and gracious hostess now.

But the occasion was one that tried to the utmost the steel control she placed on her fiery temper. For Gerry, according to the delighted newsmen, had been scooped—and how!

"No two ways about it, Miss Carlyle," said one of the reporters. "This what's-his-name has really got something—a form of life nobody's ever seen before."

"Seeing is believing," said Gerry sweetly.

"Every newscast from the Moon for the last six hours has had something about these jiggers. From Mercury, the guy says."

Gerry quirked up an eyebrow. "I've scoured Mercury's twilight zone twice for life-forms; I've brought back the only living things ever seen by man on the surface of Mercury. I even went over the dark side once."

"These animals come from Hot-side."

"That, to begin with, is a bare-faced lie," Gerry smiled. "D'you know what the temperature is on the sunward side of Mercury? No matter what kind of insulation he used in his spacesuit, a man's brains would boil in a split second."

"Sure," said the reporter. "But this guy has the creatures, Miss Carlyle, and nobody has ever seen anything like 'em before, and he claims they're from Hot-side."

"Well, you're just wasting your time, boys, if you've come up here to get my statement. I've already told you it's a hoax."

"Professor Boleur looked 'em over. He says they're the McCoy," persisted the nervy reporter, defying the lightning.

Gerry scowled at this, and more flash-bulbs went off. Boleur's reputation was unimpeachable, impossible to ignore.

Just then Gerry's secretary came in, looking apprehensive.

"A telecall, Miss Carlyle. From—er—from the Moon."

Electric tension filled the room. Gerry took a deep breath, opened her mouth, and closed it again. She said very softly,

"If it's from Mr. Von Zorn, tell him I'm not in."

"No, it's a Mr. Anthony Quade."

"I've never heard of him," Gerry said witheringly, and turned away. But a dozen eager voices informed her that Tony Quade was the man who had brought back the monsters from Mercury, and that he was one of the biggest figures in the film industry.

"Really!" said Gerry scornfully, and strode into the televisor room, dark eyes narrowed dangerously. The reporters trailed her.

Quade was visible on the screen, leaning negligently forward, puffing on a blackened briar. He opened his mouth to speak, but the girl gave him no chance.

"You," she stated, "are Quade, Von Zorn's stooge. For months your unpleasant boss has been after me to make a picture for Nine Planets. Whatever this nonsense is about bringing back a monster from Hot-side, its purpose is to trick me into signing a contract. The answer is—no! But definitely!" The cold, incisive words made Quade blink. Obviously he had underestimated this very capable young woman.

He shrugged.

"You're quite right, Miss Carlyle. Except that there's no trickery involved. It's a straight business proposition. As a rule I don't like to do business with women because they're apt to use their emotions instead of their brains, but—" Quade paused, eyeing Gerry blandly.

The girl's lips tightened. For her, Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle, to be accused of feminine weaknesses, was insupportable.

"Go ahead, Mr. Quade," she said. "I'm listening."

Quade nodded slightly, and Von Zorn himself moved into focus. His small, simian face was twisted into a somewhat frightful smile. Between cupped hands he held what appeared, at first glance, to be a large ball of fur, perhaps a trifle larger than a porcupine. It was amorphous, settling itself constantly into new positions like a jellyfish.

Von Zorn lifted one hand and literally poured the remarkable creature from one palm to the other. As he did so, a myriad pale orange and blue sparks flickered about the tips of the animal's fur-like coat.

Gerry's lips parted to form a round, red "O". For a moment she stood undecided, her extreme distaste for Von Zorn battling with her natural instincts as a huntress.

Curiosity won. She moved closer to the screen.

"It's—something new," she admitted reluctantly. "I've never run across anything just like it. Where did you get it, Mr. Quade?"

"Mercury Hot-side. That's the truth."

"Well—how?"

Von Zorn broke in, leering slightly.

"That's a professional secret."

Gerry looked through the man without apparent difficulty.

"What sort of creature is it, Mr. Quade? It hasn't any eyes, nose, ears or limbs, as far as I can see."

"Quite right," Quade said. "It has no visible sensory organs. Our labs are working on that angle right now, investigating. If you'd like to examine one of these closely—we have several of 'em—they'll be in the Nine Planets exhibit room on Lunar Boulevard. I'd like to send you one for the London Zoo, but—"

Von Zorn broke in.

"I *can* send one to you by space-mail right now, if—" He held up a sheet of paper that was obviously a contract. "If you get what I mean!" Gerry's rigid control snapped. She struck savagely at the televisor switch, and the screen went blank. The reporters surged around her. This was a story! Gerry Carlyle beaten fairly, forced to dicker with her most hated enemy if she wished to keep the reputation of the London Zoo as the only complete collection of the System's life.

Gerry impaled everyone in the room with a scorching glance. "I know what you're thinking," she snapped. "And the answer is *no!* Finally and irrevocably—*no!*"

The reporters left with the air of men retreating from the brink of a volcano, and presently Gerry Carlyle was alone.

The volcano paced the room, seething. After a time Gerry paused, and let out a quiet whistle. She called her secretary.

"Yes, Miss Carlyle?"

"Give the London Zoo a call, will you? Tell 'em to send over Volume 7 from my private file. By stratosphere plane—I'm in a hurry." Gerry's notebooks, compiled into a library of incredible fact that read like fantasy, were the result of years spent exploring the alien worlds of the System.

She remembered now that, during one of her earliest trips, she had discovered a microscopic Martian spore that in some respects resembled Von Zorn's Mercurian importation. Unfortunately she couldn't recall much about it, but nevertheless a vague uneasiness gnawed at the back of her mind.

She had a hunch that Von Zorn and Quade were running into trouble.

CHAPTER II

The Prometheans

Dr. Phineas McColm was a small, wiry man who was appalled by his unconventional mind. Science, to him, was an ever-new and ever-delightful adventure. Often his startling theories had brought down on him the thunderbolts of his colleagues, but somehow McColm always had a way of proving his wild guesses—which, actually, weren't guesses at all. A less capable man could never have become chief of staff for the Nine Planets Films labs.

As though to make up for his mental Bohemianism, McColm always wore the most correct garments in a neat and dignified manner, and inevitably a pince-nez dangled by a black ribbon from his lapels. He had never been known to look through them, however, since, despite his years of experiment in eye-straining laboratory work and the fantasy magazines he read for relaxation, he had the eyesight of a hawk.

Right now he was sitting in Von Zorn's office, reading a copy of *Startling Stories*. He stuck the magazine in his pocket and stood up as the door opened and Von Zorn and Quade came in. Quade held one of the Mercurian creatures in his cupped hands.

"Hello, there," he said to McColm. "Found out anything?"

"A little," the scientist admitted. "There's something I want to know, though. How'll you manage to get those things from Hot-side?"

"Robots and remote control," Quade said. "Keep this under your hat, though. I took a specially-insulated space ship to Mercury and sent out some robots, using a very narrow control beam—and even then I got plenty of interference from the sun."

"By the looks of your expense sheet," Von Zorn growled, "you must have had plenty of interference all round."

"It took power, Chief. I was fighting the sun's energy, and even at a distance of thirty-six million miles that's no joke. Lucky we've got the best robots in the System and the perfected narrow-beam control."

"That's true," McColm said. "These—what d'you call 'em?"

"Prometheans," Quade supplied. "After Prometheus, who lit his torch from the sun."

"Good name. That's exactly what these creatures do, you know. They get energy directly from the sun. Those spines"—McColm took the Promethean from Quade's hands and scrutinized it closely—"they look like heavy fur, but they're largely of mineral content. They serve a dual purpose. Tiny muscles activate them so they can function as legs, and when the Prometheans move, which isn't very often, they can

scurry along like caterpillars. But these spines also develop electric energy on which the creature lives.

"One of the metals we've isolated in the spines is selenium. Now it's obvious that under the conditions of terrific heat and light on Hot-side, the selenium reacts with some other metal—it might be one of several—to generate a weak electric current. We can do that in the lab, of course. The Prometheans store the electricity, like condensers, using what little they need whenever necessary." McColm's chubby face was alight with interest.

Von Zorn said hesitantly, "You mean—they *eat* electricity?"

"Don't we all?" Quade asked, and the scientist nodded.

"Of course. You eat solar energy, or you couldn't live. You'll find chloroplasts—tiny globular bodies—in the green leaves of vegetation. They contain chlorophyl. And they store sunlight as chemical energy. Photosynthesis enables a plant to change simple inorganic compounds into the complex molecules which form a great part of our own food. Here's the cycle: the plant uses chlorophyl to transform carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates, which give us solar energy in usable form when we eat the green leaf.

"These Prometheans simply take a short cut—which they can do because matter is basically electric. Millikan proved

that with his oil-drop experiment. The atomic structure of a Promethean enables it to absorb energy direct without any intermediate stages."

Von Zorn, who had been listening with eyes closed, gave a slight start and opened them.

"How about keeping 'em alive? We're a long way from Mercury."

McColm tut-tutted.

"We've solved that one," he answered. "We used a dry cell. The Promethean wrapped itself around the terminals and sucked the juice out of the battery in no time at all. And for a while it was quite active, too. It had more energy than it gets in many a long day on Mercury. Figuratively speaking, of course, for it's always day on Hot-side. I compute that a Promethean needs one dry cell a week to keep it healthy."

The annunciator buzzed. Simultaneously Ailyn Van entered.

An unusual girl, Ailyn. She was the ultra-modern star of Nine Planets, and her fan mail had strained the struts of many a spaceship. Despite the streamlined boniness of her face, she was, as the saying goes, a knockout. Her platinum-tattooed eyes passed over McColm, annihilated Quade, and raised Von Zorn's temperature.

"I want a Promethean," she said, and that was that.

Von Zorn gulped.

"Uh—I don't know, Ailyn. We only have nine of them, and the lab boys need them for experiments. What do you want one for, anyway?"

"They're so cunning," Ailyn explained. "And I'm having some publicity stills taken tomorrow. It'll be lovely publicity." Spying the Promethean McColm still held, she strode over and calmly appropriated the Mercurian, which made no comment save for a faintly fluorescent sparkle.

"Well!" said Ailyn, pouring the creature from one hand to another and watching the fireworks. "It tingles!"

"Mild electric shock," McColm explained. "Whenever it's moved about, it has to adjust itself. This means expenditure of energy; hence the sparkling. It lives on electric energy. You feed it a dry cell once a week—"

"How quaint." Ailyn stabbed the unfortunate scientist with a platinum glance and went out, trailing orange and blue sparks. And quite suddenly Quade felt an icy qualm of uneasiness.

He turned to the others.

"I wonder if we were wise in letting that creature out of our hands before we know everything there is to know about it," he said slowly.

McColm shrugged.

"They can't be dangerous. They aren't large enough to hold a strong electric charge."

The annunciator buzzed again. A voice said, "Mr. Von Zorn—Miss Kathleen Gregg to see you. She wants a—one of the Mercurians."

And that was the beginning. The Prometheans were the latest rage of the stars—the newest fad of Hollywood on the Moon. There were nine of the electric creatures to pass around among a hundred stars and featured players, not to mention the wives of the board of directors. Von Zorn helplessly permitted the Prometheans to be taken from him, with the one proviso, of course, that they remain on the Moon so Gerry Carlyle might not have a chance to acquire one of them. The price of a Promethean skyrocketed overnight into the thousands, with no sellers.

And less than twenty-four hours later—the Moon started to go haywire!

Quade and McColm were leaving the offices of Nine Planets with the intention of absorbing solar energy as prepared by the Silver Spacesuit's renowned chef. They got into Quade's surface-car but the automatic starter did not immediately operate. Quade investigated.

"Battery must be dead," he grunted. Getting out, he lifted the hood and let out, a soft whistle of amazement. Wrapped about the battery terminals like a drowsy cat was one of the Prometheans.

"Just look at that!" Quade said to McColm over his shoulder. "The little devil's deliberately sucked all the juice out of the battery. Wonder who put him there? A corny gag, if you ask me." He slipped on a glove and ungently removed the Promethean, tossing the creature to the street, where it lay sparkling vigorously and continuously. But, more surprising, it was much increased in size over any of the other Mercurians.

"It was hungry," McColm said, "that's all. Or I shall we say thirsty? Our little friend here has been tapping a sort of fountain of youth. More electricity at one time than he ever got on Mercury. Naturally the size increased. Doubtless its activity will increase proportionately."

Taking the cue, the Promethean arose, sparkling indignantly, and moved off down the street with precise movements of its under-spines. The dignity of its progress was somewhat impaired by a pronounced libration.

The Promethean wobbled.

Quade and McColm exchanged looks and suddenly grinned. Though the creature bore no resemblance to anything human, it somehow managed to convey a perfect impression of an intoxicated reveller veering homeward with alcoholic dignity.

"He can't take it," Quade chuckled. "He's tight!"

"Too much energy," McColm nodded. "He's drunk with energy, more electricity than he's ever had before at one

time."

Quade recaptured the Promethean and left the scientist briefly to take his prisoner into the Nine Planets building and turn him over to the labs. When he returned he found McColm waiting with a taxi. They drove to the Silver Spacesuit and found a table near the stage, where hundreds of important acts were striving valiantly to catch the eye of movie mogul and talent scout.

Right now a trio of acrobatic dancers were performing. The girl had form-fitting gravity plates, powered by wires invisible in the tricky lighting, and weighed less than a pound, so that her companions could perform seemingly incredible feats of skill and strength. But this was an old stunt, and attracted little attention.

Without warning the lights flickered and dimmed. Simultaneously the girl, who was at the moment shooting rapidly through the air, fell heavily upon an assistant director who was absorbedly eating lobster at a ringside table. There was an immediate confusion of acrobat, assistant director, and lobster. The audience laughed with genial approval.

Then the mirth changed to indignation as the lights went out altogether. There was mild excitement as the early evening crowd milled around aimlessly in the dark.

Wordlessly Quade and McColm ploughed through the mob toward the rear. There, where the power lead-ins passed through the meter box, another of the Prometheans was found coiled around the bared wires. The head-waiter, gripping a flashlight, was staring in wide-eyed amazement at the object and shaking his free hand.

"It—it shocked me," he murmured. "Ouch!"

Quade found a glove in his pocket, and with its aid he ripped the rapidly growing Promethean from the wires. The lights flared up again. With the Mercurian under one arm he fled back through the cocktail bar in a short cut to Lunar Boulevard, McColm at his heels.

"If any more of these little devils are loose, they may get into the central power house. That'd be plain hell."

And, just then, every light on Hollywood on the Moon except those on vehicles wavered and went out.

"You're a little late, Tony," McColm said. "They're taking the juice from the generator terminals right now!"

CHAPTER III

Panic on the Moon

Quade hailed a taxi, leaped for its running-board. He promptly found himself sailing up in an astounding jump, hurtling completely over the surface-car and coming down lightly on the other side.

The cabman thrust his head unwarily through the window to stare at this athletic marvel, and dived ungracefully out to crack his head smartly against the paving of Lunar Boulevard.

McColm, guessing what had happened, hastily glided around the taxi and helped the two men to their feet.

"The gravity plates below us," he said tonelessly. "They're not working either. More Prometheans sucking away the power."

"You don't tell me," said Quade bitterly, experimenting with a tender ankle. "Take us to Central Power, buddy, and make it fast." As the taxi jerked into motion he murmured, "Thank God there's only nine of these blasted things altogether." He still held the captive Promethean and now, opening a baggage compartment, he thrust the creature inside and slammed the panel.

Men and women were pouring from night spots and buildings along Lunar Boulevard. Even late workers on the sets of Nine Planets gave up and joined the tumultuous throng. Surface auto-cars, with their individual batteries and lights, were small oases in the absolute, blackness of interstellar space. Hollywood on the Moon was half frightened and half amused by what they considered

something of a gag while a temporary difficulty in the power rooms was repaired.

Through the mob Quade's scooted skilfully, heading for the entrance to the lunar caverns, where gigantic generators produced the electric power that was the very life-blood of the Moon. Arriving at the skyscraper that masked the mighty machines beneath, Quade and McColm piled out.

"Turn around so your headlights shine down the entrance ramp," Quade commanded, thrusting a bill in the driver's hand. Without waiting for an answer he followed McColm down into gloom.

The elevator bank was motionless and dark, but not silent. From within two of the shafts floated up a terrific banging and shouting from carloads of passengers trapped between floors and suspended precariously by emergency brakes.

Quade ran to the stairs and led the way down the descending spiral. Two minutes of clattering, reckless flight in total darkness brought the men to the power room level. A flickering red glow guided them to the central cavern, a vast natural chasm filled with the dynamos, generators, and huge machines that kept the Moon alive. Several piles of cotton waste were burning here and there.

Normally everything in the power house is more or less automatic, and few attendants are necessary. At the moment one of these, a burly man with a harassed expression, was

striving frantically to pry loose one of the Prometheans from the terminals of a generator.

Since the mercurian was more than ten feet in diameter and spread over most of the generator's surface, the burly man's efforts were not notably successful. Indeed, his attempt to pry the creature loose with a crowbar seemed merely a gesture.

As Quade ran forward the whole cavern seemed to explode in a blinding blaze of flame. There was a deafening thunderclap, and an invisible hand seemed to lift Quade and McColm and smash them back. The attendant vanished. A spouting, roaring fountain of sparkling pinwheels showered over the power room's plastic floor.

Presently the world stopped reeling and Quade clambered unsteadily to his feet. The electric lights were again burning; blue mercury and pinkish helium globes glowed here and there among the others. With numbed surprise Quade noticed that the Promethean no longer clung to the naked power lines. But all over the room were scattered dozens of small Prometheans, glittering madly as they poured in a drunken rout toward the generators. A score of them reached the bared terminals, and the lights went out again.

The cotton waste still burned. McColm arose, his round face grimy.

"Did you see that?" he breathed. "They've reproduced! When they get so much electricity stored up in them they can afford to share it with offspring, they divide by multiple fission."

Quade was kneeling beside the attendant's motionless body.

"Yeah ... he's still alive. That's a miracle. McColm!" He stood up, lips tightening grimly. "This is pretty serious. We've got to stop those things right away!"

The two men marched into the sparkling sea, kicking a path toward the generators. Quade, with his gloved hand, began pulling the Prometheans from the terminals. McColm tried to help, but was promptly knocked sprawling by a savage electric shock from one of the visibly growing Prometheans.

"Never mind," Quade said swiftly. "I can pull 'em off faster than they can climb back on. Find a bag or something to put them in."

But it was too late. The Prometheans were, so to speak, in their cups, and large enough and active enough to cause Quade trouble. In some obscure fashion they realized that Quade was an enemy, trying to prevent them from reaching the intoxicating electric current. So they advanced with drunken persistence and surrounded him.

An electric shock is not calculated to induce calm. Quade yelped and fell down, his legs momentarily paralyzed. The

Prometheans sparkled with a vaguely triumphant air and advanced.

McColm rushed in, kicking vigorously, and dragged Quade to safety.

"This'll never do," the scientist gasped. "There's no bag to hold them in, and they'd burn their way out anyhow. We've got to get weapons."

Quade stood up, tottering slightly.

"Where? The only weapons are in the prop department on the lot. This is a city, not a fortress. The police have gas guns and bullets, but the Prometheans don't breathe and are too homogeneous to be harmed by explosives. They haven't any vital parts. They'd just be blown apart and we'd have a lot of new Prometheans to fight."

"Heat rays?" McColm said. "No—they'd absorb the energy. Wait! We might short-circuit them. They must have a positive and negative end, or they'd never be able to absorb the electricity as they do. If we could place an iron bar so as to touch each end—"

"Walking over a metal plate would act the same way," Quade said, and pointed. One of the Prometheans was crawling idly over the iron housing of a turbine, completely unconcerned.

McColm blinked.

"Well—we might douse them with water and short them that way."

Quade went to a drinking fountain and bent over it. Usually this broke a light-beam impinging on a photo-electric cell, and sent water spouting up. Nothing happened. The lights were out, of course.

Quade found a manually-operated fountain, but this, too, was useless.

"The pumps aren't working," he grunted. "They take power too, you know."

When architects had designed the fantastic beauty and utility of Hollywood on the Moon, they had decided against placing any unsightly water tanks above ground for gravity flow water. Instead, they had placed the storage tanks in the Moon's caverns, with powerful pumps to direct an upward flow.

"Well," McColm said desperately, "let's try clubs. Maybe we can beat them to a pulp." With this ferocious intention he found a crowbar for himself and one for Quade, and turned back to the Prometheans. These creatures, no longer molested, had returned to sucking juice from generators, and were having an uproarious time in their strange manner, dropping occasionally to the floor to reel about with dizzy delight, sparkling in all colors of the spectrum.

One of them wobbled toward Quade and made a playful dash at his ankles. The crowbar crashed down. But the Promethean seemed to ooze out from under the blow, squirting away to carom against one of its colleagues some distance away. The two Mercurians conferred for a moment, and then staggered off to a generator, sparkling mockingly at the discomfited Quade.

It was impossible to kill the creatures thus. And before long another terrific explosion rocked the power room and a second Promethean burst flaming into a score of smaller ones. Quade seized McColm's arm and drew him back to the comparative safety of the stairs.

"We're wasting our time," he panted. "Look at those devils crawling toward us to give us the works. We'll have to have help, that's all there is to it." He paused to lift the unconscious attendant to his shoulder and followed McColm up the stairs. A few Prometheans followed, but in their condition the puzzle of climbing steps was difficult if not insurmountable, and presently they all rolled down again.

The taxi-driver was still waiting, listening to the radio in his car.

"Nine Planet's office, quick!" snapped Quade.

"You won't find nobody there," said the driver. "Von Zorn's ordered everybody to evacuate the Moon until the Mercurian menace is under control."

"Mercurian menace," Quade groaned. "That baboon would be melodramatic on his death-bed. All right—to the space port, then." As the taxi started he called, "How long were we down below?"

"Pretty long. Seemed like a century. A half hour, I guess. Von Zorn's speech kicked open the emergency circuit, so everybody on the Moon must have listened in."

"Radio?" McColm rasped. "Where'd they get the power?"

"Emergency batteries, of course," Quade said.

They sped through a stricken city. The panic was on! All Hollywood on the Moon was fleeing for the space ships and safety. Occasionally a wild-eyed man sprang into the taxi's path to flag a ride, but the expert driver tooted his car around without losing speed. Three times they heard distant explosions and saw momentary flares of sparks against the backdrop of starry darkness. Prometheans were multiplying.

"It wouldn't be so bad if they hadn't all managed to get loose at the same time," Quade muttered. "It was so damned quick. They had control before we knew there was any danger."

With decreased gravity pedestrians bounced about like rubber balls. Luckily the street was level, but whenever the car hit a bump it rose for some distance, with the motor roaring and the wheels spinning madly. The space port was a

shrieking bedlam of milling humanity in the fitful light of automobile lamps and improvised flares. Quade smiled grimly as he watched some of Nine Planets' ruggedest he-men battling past frenzied women to get passage on the ships.

Occasionally Prometheans scurried about, kicked at and abused almost pathetic in their apparent lonely helplessness. But the stars, who had not long past displayed them proudly at social events, now screamed and ran at the very sight of a Mercurian.

Presently the outgoing ship was jammed full of humanity, and the airlock closed. Attendants shoved the crowd back to safety and signaled the okay to take off.

Nothing happened. Minutes passed. A chill wave of apprehension passed over the crowd. Then the lock swung ponderously open and the ship's commander stood in the opening. He held in both hands a swollen, sparkling Promethean.

"All the juice is gone from the storage batteries," he called. "Can't generate a spark in the rocket chambers. And it'll take hours to build up enough current to energize the gravity plates."

The same condition was found to exist on four other space ships. That left only a few, not nearly enough to evacuate a quarter of the Moon's inhabitants. But these took off and sped toward Earth, sending frantic radio signals for aid. The Moon's emergency radio equipment had gone dead

when a Promethean found it, and signals broadcast from New York and London to the relay ships beyond the Heaviside layer brought little hope. All spacecraft within a wide radius had been ordered to converge on the Moon at top speed. But the distances were those of interplanetary space, and it would take time for the nearest vessel to arrive.

And time was important, terribly so! Without power the air rectifiers were failing, the gigantic heating plates and coils died, and the beams holding down the artificial atmosphere were useless. In three or four hours the Moon would be literally a dead world.

The air was cold, rapidly getting colder. A knifing wind blew coldly from the Great Rim—a wind on the Moon, where none had blown for illimitable eons! Already the trapped atmosphere was moving out from the gigantic crater that held Hollywood on the Moon. With neither gravity nor force beams to hold it, the air was seeping over the Rim, diffusing to all parts of the surface, and dissipating in the vacuum of space.

Panic came swiftly to those caught in the death-trap. The most glamorous and beautiful city in the System now—

And in four hours, it would be—a morgue!

CHAPTER IV

The Ark Arrives

Gerry Carlyle paced the control room of the *Ark* and watched her chief pilot, Michaels, as he sat with lined, strong face intent on the instruments. The girl's stubborn chin was set; her silken blond hair tousled.

"Pep it up, Michaels, can't you?" she burst out. "It's been an hour or more since the last signal came in from the Moon."

"The refugee ships are still sending messages," he grunted.

"What of it? For all we know the Moon may be dead right now. I wish I'd radioed Von Zorn or Quade when I first got the dope on that Martian spore!"

"What was that?"

Gerry halted and frowned at the pilot.

"I ran across it long ago in a Martian volcanic area. It's microscopic, but it resembles these—these Prometheans. It absorbed energy directly from the volcanic activity. I saw them grow, Michaels, and reproduce. It's no wonder the signals from the Moon have stopped!" The girl hurried away as a thought struck her. The radio transmitter was in a nearby cabin, and quickly she adjusted it for sending. Not for the first time she wished her lieutenant and fiancé, Tommy

Strike, were along, but Strike had gone fishing for mariloca in the Martian canali, and she couldn't spare the time to pick him up.

When Gerry, after studying the notebook sent her by stratosphere from the London Zoo, had noticed the possible danger, she had immediately manned the *Ark* with a skeleton crew and pointed its nose toward the Moon. She had thought of televising Von Zorn or Quade and warning them, but hesitated.

For that the Prometheans actually were dangerous was only a theory on Gerry's part, and the possibility of Von Zorn's ridiculing her wasn't pleasant. Moreover, the president of Nine Planets would never believe the girl, would think it only a trick on her part to gain possession of the Mercurians.

So Gerry went off to investigate first-hand. And, almost at her destination, she received the first warning broadcast from Von Zorn. After that events moved thick and fast.

Gerry kicked over a switch and leaned close to the transmitter.

"Calling Hollywood on the Moon! Calling Hollywood on the Moon!"

No answer. But Gerry had expected none. She went on, "Message for Anthony Quade! Carlyle of the *Ark* calling Anthony Quade of Nine Planets Films! Please relay this message to Quade. Message follows. Quote. Meet me at the

Central Space port in twenty minutes. Bring Prometheans for experimental purposes. Signed, Gerry Carlyle. Unquote."

She repeated the message several times, and then went back to pace the control room. It seemed an eternity before Michaels lowered the ship on a cleared space, faintly illuminated by car headlights.

He pointed through a porthole.

"Look at that mob! You're not going out there, Miss Carlyle?"

"I am," Gerry laid grimly, buckling on a gun-belt. "So are you." She handed a rifle to the pilot and led the way.

As the space port swung open a surging flood of humanity, terrified, shouting, screaming, pressed forward.

"Let us in! Let us in!"

"Ten thousand dollars for a passage!"

Gerry stepped back involuntarily. Then her stubborn chin jutted. She drew the gun, waved it menacingly. Her voice cracked out, cold and incisive.

"Get back! All of you!"

Michaels, behind her, lifted the rifle. The mob hesitated, and a man shoved his way through, a Promethean under either arm. Gerry recognized him. "Quade! Here!" she cried.

He broke into a stumbling run. The crowd broke and surged forward. Quade reached the space port a few steps before the first of the mob. Gerry hauled him into the ship, planted a capable fist on the nose of a man trying to scramble aboard, and dodged inside. Michaels slammed the port, locked it.

"Lift the ship," Gerry snapped. The pilot hurried to obey. Quade stood silent, looking embarrassed. His face was grimy, and a long cut ran from forehead to chin where a flying splinter of glass had grazed him.

"In here," Gerry said, and led the way to her laboratory. Once there she stood arms akimbo and glared at Quade.

His attempt to smile was not notably successful. "Okay," he said. "Go ahead. Pour it on."

"Not at all," Gerry observed sweetly. "I've run into incompetence before."

Quade made a hopeless gesture.

"I've got a comet by the tail. Damn it, Miss Carlyle, I'm responsible for all this. So far nobody's been seriously injured, but in a few more hours the whole Moon will be dead. Unless—"

"Now you listen to me," Gerry said, the stubborn set of her chin presaging trouble. "I haven't got the resources of Nine Planets Films behind me. When I want a new monster, I have to go out and fight for it. My men have to risk death every time they follow me. That takes something, Tony Quade. Anybody with a few billion dollars can use robots to collect specimens—"

The man winced.

"Oh. You guessed that."

"Sure. Robots are the backbone of Nine Planets, aren't they? Give me that animated firework." She snatched a Promethean and reached for a magnifying lens. "No, I haven't your resources. I can't pick the finest brains in the System when I want to know something. But my knowledge is practical, Quade, and I got it from knocking around the planets for years."

"We've shut off all the power," Quade said hopelessly. "McColm—he's the head of the labs—is superintending that. But once we turn it on again, the Prometheans will suck the electricity. There must be hundreds of them now."

"This creature has a positive and a negative pole," Gerry Carlyle told him. "And there's a device to seal over the poles when they move around. That's natural, since they came from a highly metallic world."

"Yeah," Quade said. "That's why we couldn't short circuit them."

Suddenly Gerry smiled, but not pleasantly. "I can short circuit them," she observed. "I can clean up the Moon for you in a jiffy."

"You mean that?"

"Yes. I can destroy every Promethean here. Except one. I want one left alive."

Quade didn't answer. Gerry took a paper from her pocket and laid it on a table. "Here's a pen," she said. "I can write contracts too."

"What's the squeeze?"

The girl's eyes blazed dangerously.

"The squeeze—as you inelegantly term it—is simply my fee for saving the moon. I want one surviving Promethean for the London Zoo. And I want your assurance that you won't import any more from Mercury."

"But Von Zorn—"

Gerry said angrily, "I could make this a lot harder for you if I wanted to. I'll give you sixty seconds to sign that agreement."

Quade scowled but signed. He dropped the pen and said grimly, "What now?"

"I'll need a large cleared space. Where—"

"The Plaza."

"Okay. Show Michaels how to get there."

Without a word Quade went out. Presently the *Ark* grounded. Gerry was at a porthole in a jiffy. Looking out over the broad, parklike expanse, she nodded with satisfaction.

"Plenty of room. That'll help."

Gerry had an idea of how she could destroy the Mercurians. It was simple enough. More than one scientist on the Moon had already had a similar inspiration, but unfortunately power was needed to carry it out. And the only power available was in Gerry's *Ark*. It would be hours before any other ship arrived.

The girl locked the Prometheans in one of the numerous cages around the room, smilingly patted the contract in her pocket, and set to work.

"The Prometheans must be highly sensitive to electricity," she said to Quade, who had wandered in. "Or to any source of power. They'll be coming around here pretty soon."

"What's your plan?" Quade asked.

"I'm a trapper by trade, so I'm using a trap. The most primitive of weapons. As soon as I can set up a portable

power plant—"

This didn't take long, for Gerry had capable assistants. Quade, at the girl's suggestion, went outside the ship and went through the gathering crowd, organizing an emergency police staff. A large area was roped off, and the streets leading into the Plaza were cleared. And now, in the distance, the first of the Prometheans was seen arriving in a blaze of sparkling glory.

Quade, who was in conference with some of the studio staff, returned to inform Gerry of the arrival. She brushed a strand of blond hair from her eyes and murmured absently, "Not ready yet. Keep 'em away."

She didn't explain how, but nevertheless Quade went out and sent out a hurry call for a long wooden-handled shovel. Already the Prometheans were arriving in force. There was now no need for the ropes to keep the crowd back; the mob shrank away terrified from the blazing beauty of the creatures.

Faster they came, and faster. Men and women sought safety in flight. Only a few of the hardier men—many of them belonging to Quade's personal staff, hand-picked and efficient—remained. But even, these could not withstand the onslaught for long.

Slowly Quade's men were forced back to the *Ark's* port. Under the impact of violent electric shocks gasping curses and groans went up. The space ship was the center of a flaming, whirling, incandescent glare of rainbow light.

Flame-red, sun-yellow, eerie blue and green and violet, it was a fantastic spectacle of terrifying beauty.

Beauty that meant death!

CHAPTER V

Short Circuit

Gerry opened the port and said, "You can come in now." She looked cool as a cucumber. Quade angrily suspected that she had spent a few minutes renewing her lipstick and touching up her hair while he and his men struggled against the Mercurians.

"Thanks a lot," he grunted, following the others into the ship. A Promethean wobbled in after him, but a sharp kick disillusioned the creature and sent it scooting into the night. Quade slammed the port.

"Come on," Gerry said. "We're all ready." She led him down a sloping passage and opened a door. Quade saw a large circular room, carpeted, apparently, with grass.

"This compartment has a sliding floor," she said. "Sometimes we set the *Ark* down over a monster, slide the floor back into position, replace the outer insulation, and we've got him safely."

Quade was eyeing a portable power plant which had been set up near by. An iron plate lay flat on the ground, and Gerry pointed at this casually.

"The Prometheans have to unseal their poles when they feed," she, explained. "See that grounded wire? It's just a device for short circuiting. I'll show you—" She called to Michaels, and presently he appeared bearing one of the creatures. Gerry took the Promethean and dropped him to the ground, where he remained still a moment.

Then he moved directly toward the power plant. His round body slid on to the iron plate. He reached up toward a bare, dangling wire—*Puff!*

"He's dead," Gerry observed. "Caught with his seals open. His condenser charge is gone just like that."

And, sure enough, the Promethean lay flabby and motionless, all the gay fireworks gone, limp and obviously dead. Gerry kicked the creature off the plate. "Organize a bucket squad," she called to Michaels. "And open the wall—two foot radius."

Silently a gap widened in the space ship's hull. Rainbow sparklings brightened as the Prometheans surged forward. Quade suddenly noticed that Gerry wore high rubber boots; and that the girl was eyeing him with a certain malicious amusement. With grimly set lips he took the pail she handed him and waited.

The Mercurians poured in through the gap. But only a few at a time could enter, and they sped in an unerring, narrow stream toward the power plant. And, like the first Promethean, they reached up toward the dangling wire, and —*Puff!*

"Scoop 'em up," Gerry commanded tartly. "We need elbow room here."

Quade obeyed. Along the sloping corridor men stood at intervals, a bucket brigade that passed along empty pails as Quade sent up Promethean-filled ones. There were more of them than he had thought. Presently his arms began to ache, and the glances he sent toward Gerry, who was lounging negligently against the wall, were expressive.

"Keep your temper," she advised. "You're not out of the soup yet."

Since this was true, Quade didn't answer but bent to his task with renewed vigor. There must have been five or six hundred of the creatures from Mercury. But at last they were killed—all but a few too large to enter the narrow opening.

At Gerry's command, Michaels enlarged the gap so the rest of the Prometheans could surge in. Quade made a frantic bound for safety, but the girl was ahead of him and blocked the passage. "Don't just stand there!" he gritted. "One of those things is heading right for me!"

"Oh, sorry," Gerry said, and with a dexterous movement managed to propel Quade back, where he collided with a fat Promethean and was hurled to the ground by a violent electric shock. Muttering, he rose and watched the last of the creatures die. Gerry's cool voice came from the passage. "That's all. There isn't any more."

Simultaneously lights flared up all over Hollywood on the Moon. Michaels had sent out a reassuring message, and the power once more went racing through a maze of cables and wires. The jet, starry sky faded and paled as the lighting system went into action. The air rectifiers plunged into frantic operation; the force beams flared out; the heating plates and coils glowed red and then white.

Quade followed Gerry into the control room. The girl sank down into a chair and lit a cigarette. "Well?" she inquired. "What's keeping you?"

Quade flushed. "Not a thing," he said. "Except—I want to say thanks."

"Don't thank me. I've got my fee," Gerry's sly sideward glance took in Quade's somewhat flushed face. "There's one Promethean left; and he's tucked away safely in my lab."

"You're welcome to him. Only—" Quade's voice became suddenly earnest. "Miss Carlyle, do you realize what a picture this would make? Gerry Carlyle in *The Energy-Eaters*! Can't you see that billing placarded all over the System? We could make it easily. One word from you and I'll have our best script-writers grinding out a story. Have a

special premier at Froman's Mercurian Theatre—it'd clean up! You'd have enough dough to build a dozen *Arks*. And we could shoot the pic in three weeks with double exposures and robots—"

"Robots!" Gerry bounced up, crushed out the cigarette viciously. But Quade failed to heed the warning signals.

"Sure! We can fake 'em easily—"

"Mr. Quade," Gerry interrupted sternly, "first of all, I should like you to understand that I am not a fake. The name Gerry Carlyle means the real thing. I have never let down my public, and I do not intend to begin now. And, once and for all; I will not make a fool of myself by appearing in one of your corny pictures!"

Quade stared, his mouth open.

"Did you say—corny?" he asked unbelievably.

"Yes!"

"My pictures?"

"Yes," Gerry said, pouring acid on the wound. "They smell."

"That ends it," Quade snapped. "Nine Planets will keep its agreement with you. Take your Promethean. Though I doubt if it will survive your company for long." With that he turned and marched out of the *Ark*, leaving Gerry chuckling happily to herself.

However, if she had seen the object Quade took out of his pocket with such care a few moments later, she might not have been so pleased.

Twenty-four hours later Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike strolled along Broadway. Strike had just treated to hot-dogs; and with the corner of his handkerchief wiped mustard from Gerry's nose. "Thanks," she said. "But don't interrupt. Tommy, do you know what this means to us?"

"What?"

"A fortune! Customers will come like flies—that Promethean will draw millions of 'em to the Zoo. And they'll pay, too."

"Well," Strike said slowly, "I suppose so. Only I'm not sure you were right in turning down that guy Quade's offer. You'd be a knockout in pictures."

Gerry snapped, "I don't wish to hear any more about that. You know very well that when I make up my mind to something, it's settled." She paused. "Tommy! You're not listening."

Strike was staring, eyes and mouth wide open, at a blazing neon-and-mercury marquee above the entrance to a Broadway theatre.

"Gerry—look at that!" he gasped.

"What?" Gerry demanded. "I don't—*oh!*"

Strike read the sign aloud. "'Scoop! Lunar disaster! See Gerry Carlyle capture the Energy-Eaters!'"

"Get tickets," the girl said weakly.

Inside the theater they had not long to wait. Presently the feature ended and the special newsreel came on. And it was all there—Gerry's arrival in the Ark, the exciting scenes at the Plaza filmed in eerie ultra-violet, even the final destruction of the Prometheans inside the space ship.

"Just look at me!" Gerry whispered fiercely to Strike. "My hair's a mess!"

"You look all right to me," Strike chuckled. "Wonder how he got those shots without your seeing the camera?"

"He had one inside his shirt—one of the tiny automatic cameras, with sensitized wire film! He was double-crossing me all along. The worst of it is I can't sue Nine Planets. Newsreel stuff is common property. Come on—let's get out of here."

They had to fight their way through the crowded lobby. As they emerged Gerry paused to eye two long queues that stretched far along Broadway. The rush was beginning. Already radios and advertising gyroplanes were blaring: "See Gerry Carlyle capture the Energy-Eaters! A Nine Planets Film!"

Strike couldn't resist rubbing it in.

"So when you make up your mind to something, it's settled, eh?" he said.

Gerry looked at him a long moment. Then a half-smile hovered on her lips as she looked around at the increasing crowd. "Well," she said, "anyhow—I'm packing them in!"

[The end of *The Energy Eaters* by Arthur K. Barnes]