

THE
HOTHOUSE
PLANET

ARTHUR K. BARNES

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Gerry Carlyle, Frank Buck of the Future,
Searches the Swamps of Venus for a Murri

A Complete Novelet

THE HOTHOUSE PLANET

By ARTHUR K. BARNES

Author of "The Emotion Solution," "Green Hell," etc.

Contents

- I. [The Ark](#)
- II. [The Hunters](#)
- III. [The Murriss](#)
- IV. [The Stolen Shrine](#)

CHAPTER I

The Ark

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

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

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

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

"British?" he mumbled. "What British?"

"Why, Gerry Carlyle. The great Carlyle is coming today, in his special ship, with his trained crew, straight from the Interplanetary Zoo in London. The famous 'Catch-'em-alive'

Carlyle is on his way, and we're the lucky guys chosen to guide him on his expedition on Venus!"

Ransom scratched one thick, hairy leg and stepped under the shower with a sour expression.

"Ain't that somethin'?" he inquired.

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

"No, I don't. I've heard all I want to hear about him. Capturing animals from different planets and bringing them back alive to the Zoo in London is all right; I'd like the job myself. But any guy that rates the sickening amount of publicity he does must have something phony about 'im!" He kicked toward the short-wave radio in one corner of the living room. "Bein' so close to the sun, were lucky if we bring in a couple of Earth programs a day through the interference. And it seems to me every damn' one of 'em has something about the famous Carlyle. Gerry Carlyle eats Lowden's Vita-cubes on expedition. Gerry Carlyle smokes germ-free Suaves. Gerry Carlyle drinks refreshing Alka-lager. *Pfui!*

"An' now we're ordered to slog around this dripping planet for 'im, doing all the work of bagging a bunch of weird specimens for the yokels t' gape at, while he gets all the glory back home!"

Tommy Strike laughed good-naturedly.

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

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

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

"Well," he shrugged, "we can stall just before he's ready to leave, and have *some* fun at least. Maybe, too, he'll listen to reason!"

Ransom snorted in wordless disgust at this fantastic hope.

"Anyhow," insisted Strike, determined to see the cheerful side, "even if there is any disturbance, it always blows over

in a few days. I'm heading for the landing field; they're just about due."

Tommy Strike stepped outside into the breathlessly hot, blinding mist, thick with the stench of rot and decay. Earthly eyes could not penetrate this eternal shroud for more than a hundred feet at a time, even when a wind stirred the stuff up to resemble the churning of a weak solution of dirty milk. Strike grimaced and thoughtlessly filled and lit his pipe.

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

A few steps took Strike to the safety of the rear of the station, where abandoned calcium carbonate tanks loomed like metal giants in the fog. There was a time when it had been necessary to pump the stuff to the miniature space-port a safe distance away whenever a ship was about to land. There, sprayed forth from thousands of tiny nozzles high into the air, its tremendous affinity for water carved a cleared vertical tunnel in the fog for the approaching space ship pilot. New telescopic developments, however, rendered the device obsolete.

Strike paced deliberately along the trail that paralleled the ancient pipeline—Earthlings soon learn not to over-exert

in that atmosphere—and before he had covered half of it his quick ears caught the shrill whine of a space craft plunging recklessly into the Venusian air-envelope. It rose to a nerve-rasping pitch, then dropped sharply away to silence. And presently, sounding curiously muffled and distorted through the clouds, came the noise of opening ports, the clang of metal upon metal, voices.

Gerry Carlyle and company had arrived.

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

The craft was immense, approaching in size the giant clipper ships that traveled to the furthest reaches of the System. Strike had never before been so close to a ship of such proportions. He smiled at sight of the name on her bow. *The Ark*.

The Ark, of course, was one of the new centrifugal flyers, containing in her stern a centrifuge of unbelievable power, with millions of tiny rotors running in blasts of compressed

air, generating sufficient energy to hurl the ship through space at tremendous speeds. The equipment of *The Ark*, too, was the talk of the System.

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

Strike's musings were interrupted by the approach of a snappily uniformed man. The fellow saluted, smiling.

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

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

"Mr. Strike," said Barrows, "this is Miss Gerry Carlyle."

Strike stared, thunderstruck. In those days of advanced plastic surgery, feminine beauty wasn't rare, but even Strike's unpracticed eye knew that here was the real thing. No

synthetic blonde baby-doll here, but a natural beauty untouched by the surgeon's knife—spun-gold hair, intelligence lighting her dark eyes, a hint of passion and temper in the curve of her mouth and arch of her nostrils. In short, a woman.

Miss Carlyle's voice was an ice-water jet that reminded Strike of his manners.

"You don't seem enthusiastic over your temporary employer, Mr. Strike. Something wrong about me?" She withdrew her fingers from Strike's grasp and watched the crimson tide crawl up his neck.

"Oh. Oh, no." Strike fumbled for words. "That is, I'm surprised that you're a woman. I—we expected to find a man in—well, in your position. It's more like a man's job."

Sub-pilot Barrows could have warned Strike that this was a touchy point with Gerry Carlyle, but he had no chance. The girl drew herself up and pointed out coldly:

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

Strike's eyebrow twitched. Huh. An arrogant hussy, withal. Terrific sense of her own importance, wilful, selfish. He decided he didn't like her, and rather hoped she *had* come

looking for *Murris*. If so, she would learn one or two bitter lessons.

There followed a five-minute interlude of scurrying about and shouting and unloading, all done to the tune of Gerry Carlyle's voice, which could crack like a whip-lash when issuing commands. Then Strike found himself leading a small party back to the trading post with Miss Carlyle's arm surprisingly through his, her red lips asking a hundred questions, golden head bent as she listened with flattering attention.

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

"It isn't very exciting," Strike told her. "Mostly sitting around being bored stiff, playing cards or fiddling with a bum radio. Several times during a Venusian day our natives bring in a load of some of the medicinal plants for which we're up here to trade. Occasionally a rough gem of one kind or another, though Venus is very poor in minerals. Only stone really worth much to be found up here is the emerald."

Gerry Carlyle could scarcely believe that there was any profit in medicinal plants, considering transportation costs.

"Surely there isn't enough in it to persuade a young man like you to bury himself in—in this." She waved her hand around disparagingly.

"There's profit in it, all right," Strike shrugged. "The drugs distilled from some of the Venusian growths are plenty valuable. And then there's the adventure angle." He smiled wryly. "Plenty of young bucks are willing to sign a three-year contract for the thrills of living on Venus, if they don't know anything about it beforehand. But it does take an awful lot of that stuff to bring a transport ship our way. We seldom see a ship more often than three or four Earth-months apart."

The girl next directed his attention to the thousands of fungi now springing up through the moist earth with almost visible movement. They were shaped somewhat like the human body, and so pale they seemed like a host of tiny corpses rising from their graves.

Strike grimaced; he had never liked those damned things. They reminded him constantly that battle and destruction were the watchwords in this hellhole, where the fang of every creature was turned upon his neighbor, and the plants had poisoned thorns, and even the flowers gave off noxious gases to snare the unwary.

"Yes," he said. "They grow and propagate amazingly fast. Many of the smaller life-forms here exist only a single day—they are born, live, and die in one hundred and seventy hours. Naturally their life cycle is speeded up. In a few hours, all these puff-ball fungi will begin popping at once to spread their spores around. It's a funny sight.

"During the long night, of course, the spores lie dormant. And most of the larger creatures hibernate from the intense

cold. Our night life up here is nil; this is a nine o'clock planet for sure!"

Gerry Carlyle observed what all newcomers observe the minute they set foot on Venus: although the view is a drab, almost colorless one, an incredible multiplicity of odors assails the nostrils: sweet, sharp, musklike, pungent, spicy, and many unfamiliar scents as well.

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

So it went, the intimate give and take of question and answer and the pleasant business of getting acquainted, until the all-too-short walk to the station was over. But Strike was not deceived by the girl's sudden change of attitude. He knew that an interplanetary hunter of Gerry Carlyle's experience would have certainly read up on Venus before ever coming there; he realized she knew the answers already to every question she asked.

She had simply noticed Strike's disapproving eyebrow during the first moments of their meeting, and had deliberately determined to ingratiate herself with him to promote harmony during her brief stay on the cloudy planet. Strike was willing to harmonize, but he looked upon the girl

with caution and distaste. No man likes any woman to think she's bamboozling him.

CHAPTER II

The Hunters

Gerry Carlyle was decidedly a woman of action.

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

Strike nodded, staring at this strange girl who could be one instant so warm and friendly, the next imperious and dominating as a queen.

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

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

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

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

"Germ-killer," he smiled. "For each dangerous animal on this planet, there's a hundred vicious bacteria that will knock off an Earthman in twenty hours. I guess that finishes up the preliminaries. Shall we go? I ought to warn you that the sense of hearing is well developed up here, so it'll help if you move as quietly as possible."

"One moment." Gerry Carlyle's cool voice nailed Strike to the ground. "I want two things thoroughly understood. First, I'm the sole leader of this party, and what I say goes." She smiled with icy sweetness. "No complaints, of course, Mr. Strike, but it's just as well to forestall future misunderstandings. Secondly, you must know that the main object of this expedition is to catch one or more *Murris* and return with them alive. We'll take a number of other interesting specimens, of course, but the *Murri* is our real goal."

She looked around challengingly, as if expecting a strange reaction. She was not disappointed. Strike glanced up at the porch, exchanged a significant look with Ransom. He smiled wryly.

Gerry Carlyle's temper flared out momentarily.

"What's the mystery about this *Murri*, anyhow? Everywhere I go, on Venus, back on Earth among members of my own profession, if the word *Murri* is mentioned everyone immediately looks at the floor and scowls and tries to change the subject! Why?"

No one spoke. The Carlyle party shifted uneasily, their boots making sucking sounds. Presently Strike offered:

"The fact is, you'll never take back a *Murri* alive. But you wouldn't believe me if I told you the reason, Miss Carlyle. I ___"

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

"Oh, no."

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

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

"Then are they so delicate they can't stand the trip? If so, I can tell you we've done everything to make hold No. 3 an exact duplicate of living conditions here."

"No, it isn't that, either," Strike sighed.

"Then what the devil is it?" she cried. "Why these evasions and secretive glances? You're acting just like Hank Rogers did when I caught him one day in the Explorers'

Club. He came up here a while back to get a good *Murri* specimen. But he returned empty-handed. I asked him why, and he refused to tell me. Acted actually embarrassed about something. What's it all about?"

Tommy Strike had no more stomach for feminine ridicule than the average man, so he shook his head firmly.

"It can't be explained, Miss Carlyle. It's just something you'll find out for yourself."

And on that electric note of dissatisfaction, the party struck off through the mist in search of the weird animal life of Venus. The half-dozen men from *The Ark* were surprised to find the going comparatively easy. Although the great amount of water on Venus would presuppose profuse jungle growth, there is insufficient sunlight to support much more than the tallest varieties of trees, which shoot hundreds of feet up into the curtain of the mist, their broad-bladed leaves spread wide to treasure every stray sunbeam that filters through.

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

"The main danger in travel," as Strike explained, "is in losing the beam. Sometimes we have to circle a bog, and we've got to be pretty careful not to lose that radio beam."

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

The entire party was stricken in its tracks for an instant at the blast of strange thunder. Not from fear, because these people had met and bested nature's most terrifying forms all over the Solar System; but rather at the sudden unexpectedness of it, coming literally from out of nowhere.

Strike grinned.

"Shovel-mouth," he explained. "Not very dangerous."

Gerry Carlyle glanced tolerantly at her guide at the implication.

"We prefer 'em dangerous, as a matter of fact. Though I hardly expected to find anything interesting this close to—er—civilization."

Strike grinned at the thrust, and a little pringle of excitement crawled up his spine as he watched the Carlyle party slip into their smooth routine. The girl's crisp commands detailed one man to remain with the bulky

equipment. Two more loaded a pair of cathode-bolt guns that looked like baby cannon beside the pistol Strike carried for emergencies.

Two of the others, including the girl, selected weapons that looked very much like the old-fashioned rifles, to be seen now only in museums, that fired lead or steel projectiles, except for a rather large bore and cumbersome breech. Barrows was to work the camera.

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

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

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

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

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

Not a single unnatural sound broke the quiet; not a stick snapped, not a fungus squelched beneath an incautious heel. Even the sucking noises from marshy spots were silenced. In sixty seconds they slipped into a little clearing and stood gazing with professional curiosity at the doomed shovel-mouth.

It was worth a second look. Fifty feet long and nearly twenty feet wide, it had three pairs of squat, powerful legs ending in enormously spatulate discs. Its hide was a thick, tough grey stuff that gleamed dully with a wet slickness in the half light. But the most surprising feature was the creature's head which, instead of tapering to a point, broadened into a mammoth snout that extended several feet horizontally from mouth-corner to mouth-corner. When placed to the ground it had a ludicrous similarity to the fan-tail vacuum cleaner attachment used to clean upholstered furniture.

The shovel-mouth stared at the party, uninterested, from out of muddy eyes, then lowered his head and waddled vigorously across the clearing, his mouth plowing up a wide,

shallow furrow as he ate indiscriminately of the numerous fungi, low-lying bushes, sticks, and mud.

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

Evidently the animal had been at it some time, for the clearing looked as if a drunken farmer had been trying to plow it up. Gerry signaled, and her men moved into position like soldiers. She slipped up on the creature's blind side and aimed her curious rifle at the soft, inner portion of the shovel-mouth's leg. *Plop!* The beast jerked, nipped at the wound momentarily, then continued to feed. In twenty seconds it reeled dizzily about and fell to the ground, unconscious.

Just like that. Simple, efficient, no fuss at all. Tommy Strike felt a sense of anti-climax.

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

"With Mr. Strike heroically rescuing Gerry Carlyle from the jaws of death?" The girl smiled as Strike winced. "Sorry, but this is a business, Mr. Strike, and I find it pays to play safe and sane and preserve my men intact. I value them too much to risk their lives for the sake of a bunch of cheap-thrill seekers back home. No. We have excitement and adventure

only when someone makes a mistake. Carlyle parties make a minimum of mistakes."

It was the arrogant and cocksure Gerry Carlyle speaking then, and Strike let it go. "I suppose you used a sort of hypodermic bullet in that rifle of yours. But I thought you'd be using more scientific weapons than that. It seems sort of —sort of primitive."

The girl smiled.

"I know. You're wondering about the anaesthetic gases. Or the wonderful new paralysis ray. Well, there's a lot of inventions that work fine under controlled lab conditions that are flops in the field. The paralysis ray is just a toy, totally impracticable. It's unreliable because each different animal requires a different amount of the ray to subdue him, and we seldom have time to fool around experimenting in my work.

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

Strike nodded understanding and turned to receive still another surprise. While he and the girl talked, the party had prepared the motionless shovel-mouth for transportation back to *The Ark*. Broad bands of bluish metal had been fastened around legs and neck, and the men had even

managed to slide two or three underneath the huge body and encircle it.

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

"Anti-gravity!" said the girl with a theatrical flourish of the hand. "We give the metal bands a gravity charge of slightly more than one. Like charges repelling, they rise from the ground and carry the animal with them!"

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

"I think," said Gerry Carlyle, "that we're too likely to bump into something in this mist unawares. If you'll bring out the electronic telescope, Mr. Barrows—"

Barrows at once produced one of the most interesting gadgets that Strike had yet seen, a portable model, of course, of the apparatus used on all the modern centrifugal flyers. It consisted of a power unit carried by one of the men, and a long glass tube to be carried by the observer. The front of it presented a convex surface covered with photoelectric material to the electron streams of all kinds of light, from ultra-violet to infra-red.

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

By keeping in constant touch with Ransom at the post, who kept the beam moving slowly around like the spoke of a wheel, Strike enabled the party to move laterally. Through the telescope they picked up many of the smaller and shyer life-forms not ordinarily seen—lizards, crawling shapes, crablike forms, even two or three of the scaly man-things native to Venus, slithering silently through the fog with sulky expressions on their not-too-intelligent fishlike faces. Strike and Gerry became so interested in watching through the 'scope that it was nearly their undoing.

Without warning a rushing sound filled the air at their left, and a round grey ball rolled swiftly into view. It crossed their path dead ahead, propelling itself with dozens of stout cilia that sprouted indiscriminately from all sides, then paused abruptly. The miniature forest of arms waved delicately and exploringly in the air as if trying to locate the source of a new disturbance. Then the fantastic thing rushed unerringly at the Carlyle party.

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

"Rotifer," said Strike shortly. "Something like the tiny animalcules back on Earth, magnified many times and adapted for land travel. Venus is largely aqueous and was even more so at one time. Much of its terrestrial life developed from life-forms originally dwelling in the water —" He stepped aside again, casually, as the rotifer rumbled by. "They have their uses, though. That half-hidden mouth of theirs takes in everything it contacts. They're the scavengers of this planet. We call 'em Venusian buzzards."

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

"They may have their uses," admitted the sub-pilot, "but this baby'll be a damn' nuisance if we have to spend the rest of the trip dodging him!"

There was truth in that, so the rotifer was despatched with a cathode bolt. But as they crowded around to examine this curious bit of protoplasmic phenomena, a shrill scream racked their nerves from high up in the fog, as frightfully shocking as the shriek of a wounded horse. They swiveled about as a man to gaze upon the most terrifying of all products of Venusian vertebrate evolution.

Fully fifty feet the monster towered into the mist, standing upright on two massive legs reminiscent of the extinct terrestrial Tyrannosaurus rex. A set of short forelegs were equipped with hideously lethal claws; the head was long and narrow like a wolf's snout, with large ears and slavering fangs. Everything about the nightmare creature was constructed for efficient annihilation, particularly of those animals who mistakenly sought safety in the tops of the tall trees.

"A 'whip!'" yelled Strike, turning to the cathode-gun carriers, sudden apprehension stabbing him deep. "It's a whip! Let 'im have it, quick!"

The men looked uncertainly at Gerry Carlyle, who promptly countermanded the order.

"Not so fast. I want this one alive. They've nothing like him in London."

She flipped up her rifle, fired at a likely spot. Strike groaned as the monstrous whip squealed shrilly again and again, staring down at the tiny Earthlings from fiery little eyes. Then from, that wolfish snout uncurled an amazing fifty-foot length of razor-edged tongue, like that of an Earthly ant-eater. Straight at Gerry Carlyle it lashed out, cracking sharply. Strike's rush caught the girl from behind and dumped her gently but quickly to the spongy earth.

"Curl up in a ball!" he yammered in her ear. "So he can't get any purchase with that tongue!"

Gerry obeyed, and Strike turned to warn the others as the whip swished over the girl's ducking head.

"Scatter!" he cried. "Don't—"

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

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

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

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

reports sounded in rapid succession, three, four, five. And presently the whip reeled like a huge building in an earthquake. Uncertainty racked the big body; it swayed. A few wavering steps described a short half circle. Then quietly it lay awkwardly down and passed into insensibility.

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

"Whew! That was too damn' close for comfort!"

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

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

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

No emotion disturbed the serenity of the girl's face.

"On the contrary. I regret Blair's passing very much; he was a well-trained and valuable man. But he can be replaced."

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

Gerry said simply, "We never sign on family men."

Then she turned her back to Strike and snapped orders to prepare the whip for transportation back to *The Ark*. But in the last tiny instant as she turned away; Strike glimpsed something in her eye that smote him speechless with its sudden and complete revelation. It explained at once and absolutely the reason for Gerry Carlyle's shell of impersonal reserve and callousness. She was a woman walking in a man's world, speaking men's language, using men's tools.

As a constant companion of men, she had to force herself to live their life, meet them on their own terms. To command their respect, she felt she had no right to use the natural endowments—her charm and beauty—that nature intended her to use for that purpose. Indeed, she dared not use them, for fear of the consequences. To give way to feminine emotion would be, she feared, to lose her domination over her male subordinates. She was, in short, that most pathetic of beings—a woman who dared not be a woman.

All this Tommy Strike learned and comprehended in a single glance. His feelings toward Gerry Carlyle began to change, from dislike to pity, and perhaps to something warmer. The thing he had seen was a woman's tear.

CHAPTER III

The Murris

The succeeding days passed swiftly and adventurously. Specimen after weird specimen was subdued and carried to the rapidly filling hold of *The Ark*. The only fly in Strike's ointment was the ever-approaching hour when he must produce a *Murri* or face the wrath of Gerry Carlyle. And although he knew it was coming, still the demand came as a bit of a shock on the beginning of the sixth day.

"Mr. Strike." Not once had the girl dropped her shield of formality. "I've been pretty patient with your repeated side-tracking of my requests for a *Murri*. But our visit here's about over; we leave in forty-eight hours. To remain over during a Venusian night would mean a tiresome and dangerous journey home. Come on now. No more stalling."

Strike looked at the girl.

"What if I refused?"

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

Strike nodded, shrugged.

"All right. Just a second while I—"

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

"Thought you'd be needing this, Tommy," he said significantly, with a disgusted glance at the girl.

"Yeah. I sure do." Strike fitted the contrivance to his body by shoulder straps.

"Now what?" Gerry wanted to know, "Do you need special equipment to find a *Murri*? What's that contraption for, anyhow?"

Strike adopted a professorial attitude.

"The power unit of this 'contraption' consists of a vacuum-tube oscillator and amplifier, and the receiver unit of an inductance bridge and vacuum-tube amplifier. There's also a set of headphones," he held them up in classroom style, "and an exploring coil. The bridge is energized by a sinusoidal current, brought to balance by appropriate resistance and inductance controls. If a conductive body comes within the artificially created magnetic field of the coil, eddy currents set up in the conductive mass will reduce the effective inductance of the exploring coil, serving to unbalance the bridge. This condition is indicated in the headphones—"

"Stop! Stop!" Gerry covered her ears with her hands. "I know an ore-finding doodle-bug when I see one! I just

wanted to know why you're carrying it with you now."

"Oh. For protection."

"Protection against what?"

"The natives."

Gerry stared. "Natives! Those scaly, fish-faced rummies that skulk around just out of sight in the fog? Why, those timid little things wouldn't hurt us; they couldn't. Besides, how'll your doodle-bug protect us against them?"

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

Someone tittered, and Gerry flushed.

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

"That's no joke," Strike said with a touch of bitterness. "It's a fact. Ever since Murray made his first trip to Venus, the natives have gone for gold teeth in a big way. They took Murray for a god, you know, and emulated him in many ways. He had several gold teeth, relics of childhood dentistry, so the natives promptly scraped up some of the cheaply impure gold that's found around here and made caps for their teeth. As for their not hurting us, Miss Carlyle, that remains to be seen. It has always meant trouble when one of you animal-catchers tries to mess around with the *Murris*."

You'll understand me better in a few minutes." He shrugged with his eyebrows. "I'm just being prepared."

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

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

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

Gerry completely forgot to be indignant at Strike's holdout, as she was swept, away in the gale of merriment that overcame the party at sight of the strange creatures. Perhaps half of the colony were in constant motion, scrambling round and round the huge bole of the tree, up and down, popping in and out of their holes, out along the mighty frondlike branches and back, frantically. The others simply sat watching in solemn indifference, occasionally opening their pouting lips to ask sorrowfully,

"*Murri? Murri? Murri?*"

They were well named. Though soft and greyish-brown, with scanty hair growth on their backs, their size and antics did resemble terrestrial simians. With their tremendous nasal development, they looked much like the Proboscis monkey. And this very de Bergerac beak of a nose made their name even more appropriate, for Sidney Murray, Stanhope's co-explorer, was famous throughout the System for having the hugest and ugliest nose extant. The *Pseudo-simia Murri* colony presented to the eyes of the fascinated watchers a hundred facial replicas of Sidney Murray spinning and dancing fantastically around the tree.

"Oh!" gasped Gerry finally, wiping laughter's tears from her cheeks. "Oh, but this is precious! Who—who named them?" She struggled mightily with a series of bubbling chuckles.

Strike looked lugubriously at her.

"Murray himself named 'em. He has quite a sense of humor."

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

"You haven't got 'em in London yet," Strike pointed out, keeping one uneasy eye on the indicator of his "doodle-bug."

"If you think anything's going to stop me now, you don't yet know Gerry Carlyle!" Again the arrogant, self-willed woman.

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

"Only a weak defense mechanism," Strike explained it, "as *Murris* live almost exclusively on the datelike fruits of the tree they live in. The sting's no worse than a bee-sting." He extended one knotty forearm, showing a small pock-mark where he had once been stung.

The second was the large brown eyes possessed by the *Murri*, which stared at the intruders unblinkingly with a heart-wringing, hypnotic expression of sorrow.

"They look as if they'd seen all the trouble and woe in the Universe," as Barrows put it. "Makes me feel like a louse to take 'em away from their home!"

The third was a heap of strangely incongruous junk piled at the base of the big tree. There were cheap clocks, gewgaws, matches, children's fireworks, odds and ends.

"Offerings by the natives," explained Strike. "That's the legal tender up here; medicinal weeds and rough gems in exchange for—these things." He gestured at the pile of trash. "Anything fire-producing is especially valuable. The *Murri* is the native's god. Because of his resemblance to Sidney Murray, the First God."

There was more laughter, but subdued this time as the party realised that removing one or more *Murris* would be to commit Venusian sacrilege. "I see now what you meant by 'causing trouble'," Gerry said. "But it can't be too much for you to handle. It's happened before, I assume, and always blew over. These primitives— If that's your only reason for dissuading us to capture a few—"

"That's not the only reason." But Strike would explain no further.

"More mystery!" Gerry snorted, and supervised the set-up of a big net under one of the longer overhanging branches. Then two well-directed shots snapped the limb and catapulted a half dozen astonished *Murris* into the net. With incredible agility most of them bounced into the air and scrambled to safety. But one was caught in the tricky meshes. The ends of the net were quickly folded together to form a bag.

"Got him!" exulted Gerry. "Why, that was easy!"

"Sure. But he isn't in London Zoo yet, nor even back to the ship."

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

"*Murri-murri-murri?*"

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

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

The little captive burst into a flurry of wild activity, struggling with unbelievable fury to escape. He twisted, clawed, spat, bit. As the carriers bore him inevitably further away from his home, he seemed to go absolutely mad, stinging himself repeatedly with barbed tail in an outburst of insane terror. After a series of heart-rending cries of despair, he gave a final frenzied outburst that ended with a gout of pale, straw-colored blood from his mouth.

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

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

Strike answered her bewildered glance with melancholy triumph.

"Agoraphobia. *Murris* are the most pronounced agoraphobes in the System. They spend their whole lives on and around the particular tree in which they're born. Take 'em a few yards away and they have a nervous breakdown ending in convulsions and death." He indicated the dead body in the net. "I could have told you, but you wouldn't have believed me. You'd have come to find out for yourself anyhow."

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

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

"Partly."

"Partly! You mean there's something else queer about these—"

Strike nodded gloomily.

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

"Right!" Gerry determined.

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

"And so?"

Strike shrugged.

"So you'll fail, too. But don't let me stop—"

"You won't stop me, Mr. Strike. Don't ever think it!"

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

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

As the light imperceptibly faded, Ransom suggested, "I guess *The Ark* will be leaving soon. Now's the best time for 'em to take off. Conjunction."

Strike shook his head.

"No. That tough little wench Carlyle is over there in her ship learning a mighty bitter lesson. She won't leave now; and she won't leave for some time," he predicted. "Wait and see." But only to himself did he admit the fingers of secret joy that squeezed his heart to breathlessness at the thought of seeing that incredible girl again.

CHAPTER IV

The Stolen Shrine

Strike was right. As the absolute darkness of Venusian night dragged its black cloak over the trading post, light footsteps ran up the stairs outside. Knuckles rapped on the metal door.

Ransom opened. There was still warmth in the thick air; it was almost pleasant at that hour. Gerry Carlyle pushed in.

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

Strike shrugged. "So why come to me?"

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

"Nobody can do anything. You'll never take them back alive. I told you that before; presently you'll believe it. If there's any mercy in you, you'll return those two to their home while they're well."

Gerry's eyes flashed blue fire.

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

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

Gerry went away furious, but was back within twenty-four hours. She was beginning to show the strain; her hair was awry, eyes bagged and bloodshot from lack of sleep. Her nerves were jumpy. "Strike," she begged, "can't you suggest anything? They're growing thinner by the hour! You can see them waste away! If you've been holding something back just to—to discipline me, I'll say 'uncle'. Only please—"

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

"You flatter yourself if you think I'd sacrifice even a couple of *Murris* for the sake of softening you a little."

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

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

"Tommy," she wailed. "I can't stand it any longer! They just sit there, so helpless, so frail, without a sound, and *stare* at me. Those pathetic brown eyes follow me wherever I go. They—they're mesmerizing me. I see them in darkness; I see them in my dreams, when I manage to get to sleep. It's pitiful—and horrible. Even the crew goes around now with silent accusation in their faces. I can't stand it any longer!"

Strike's heart went out to this bewildered little girl, needing a man's comfort but not knowing how to get it.

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

"Yes. I understand. Rogers was ashamed to admit what he thought was a weakness. Embarrassed to have anyone think a funny little Venusian monkey could soften him up by just staring at him with those hypnotic brown eyes." She shuddered. "I—I sent the boys out to find that tree and dig it up whole; *Murris* and all, to transport back to earth. I thought that might solve the difficulty. But I see now it wouldn't—"

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

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

"How do you mean? Are they in danger?"

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

"But surely they're not out at night! The temperature—"

"Doesn't affect them. They evolved from an aqueous life-form and like it cold. Fewer natural dangers for 'em at night, too."

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

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

"We can't debate it now. At least make yourself useful; carry this." He handed her the powerful searchlight, and they moved off together.

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

A quick run brought them to the clearing. Stationary lights made a ring about the workers, who had already fastened anti-gravity plates to the tree, and who were loosening the frozen soil. Strike's voice rang out through the thick plume of his breath.

"Stop work, men! Grab your tools and beat it back—" He paused. The needle on the detector's dial was jerking spasmodically.

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

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

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

"Good heavens!" cried Gerry unsteadily. "What's wrong with them?"

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

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

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

Strike forced himself to lie quietly while the visible world rocked like a storm-lashed ship. He was conscious of the frightened yells of the stricken workmen, a rush of feet, the monosyllabic squeaks and rasps of the Venusians whose gill-like breathing system, filtered out all the poisonous elements of the atmosphere. Then Gerry's startled scream knifed his consciousness. Just one outcry, no more; Gerry's

pride would permit no begging for help. But the sounds of her aimless struggling were plain as she was carried away.

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

But Strike, on the extreme edge of the clearing, had inhaled only a little of the gas. He lay with his face close to the frozen earth, breathing cautiously, testing every lungful for tell-tale odors, then exhaling vigorously. Gradually the earth slowed its spinning as the stuff worked off. Strike became conscious of a splitting headache, as if every nerve-ending in his skull was raw and throbbing. But as he took in the scene before him, all thought of his own discomfort vanished in the wave of horror that swept over him.

The natives were out for revenge, and golden-haired Gerry Carlyle was the intended victim!

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

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

Strike started up in a frenzy, yelling. Rubbery knees promptly sent him to the ground again. Not yet. No strength. He whispered a prayer for something to delay that outstretched native finger hovering over the power unit. Perhaps he would move it the wrong way, and— But Strike went cold all over at the thought. He wasn't sure, but wouldn't that smash Gerry into a bloody pulp, grind her into a shapeless mess against the earth?

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

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

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

hurtled in a cloud to the source of their favorite scent. Few flew low enough to hit Strike, and those were glancing blows that simply left red welts across his back. He saw perfectly the entire scene as his unwitting allies, the Whiz-bangs, stormed into the clearing.

It was as if someone had loosed a series of shotgun charges at the natives. The leader of the Venusians dropped as if cathoded when several of the armored beetles rifled into his most vulnerable spot, the throat. The night rattled with the sodden plunking of living projectiles into scaly flesh. The natives set up a hideous, thin wailing. They ducked; they flailed about them with vigorous futility. And finally they broke and ran wildly away into the dark, dropping even their weapons in their flight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Murri? Murri-mirri-murri?*"