

THE ADVENTURES OF GERRY CARLYLE – VOL. II
THE INTERPLANETARY HUNTRESS RETURNS

By
Arthur K. Barnes

A Futures Past Classic– Selected and Introduced by Jean Marie Stine

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BONUS BARNES SHORT STORY

The Little Man Who Wasn't There

INTRODUCTION

This is the second of three e-books gathering together the long out-of-print adventures of Gerry Carlyle, the bring-'em-back-alive Interplanetary Huntress, on assignment for the London Interplanetary Zoo. Gerry has been hailed as science fiction's first heroine, and her exploits featured in the pages of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, a sci-fi pulp magazine of the 1930s whose title suggests the kind of colorful, exuberant stories that were its trademark. Fearless, intrepid, and occasionally headstrong, Gerry rocketed from planet to planet in her spaceship, The Ark, matching her wits against the solar system's most dangerous creatures through seven unforgettable tales – until World War II, and not alien beasties, cut her career short (co-opting her chronicler, Arthur K. Barnes, into the army).

It has been said that, with a few notable exceptions, pulp writing – and particularly science fiction – was a young person's game back then. So it should be no surprise to learn that Mr. Barnes was twenty-five years old when he penned the first Gerry Carlyle adventure – but he was already a well-established pulp author with dozens of stories to his credit in what he described as "a gamut of magazines – from detective and horror, to sports, adventure and science fiction." Perhaps his literary success shouldn't be considered too surprising, considering Barnes was a member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, a key he once ruefully remarked, "that I have since learned unlocks nothing at all."

Barnes detailed the writing process involved in some of the Gerry Carlyle tales for *Thrilling Wonder Stories*' readers in a series of articles for a department titled "The Story behind the Story." These informal essays, which offer unique insights into the mind of a science fiction author, have languished in the moldering pages of the pulps, and never been reprinted since. Here, unseen for more than six decades, is how Barnes described the genesis of four of those stories:

* * *

"'The Dual World' is the result of many small items swelling the main river of the story. Chief of these was the – to me – amazing reader response to the first Gerry Carlyle yarn, for which I am duly grateful, indeed, and a good bit of that salad oil known as kind words and flattery by our editor. During two hilarious evenings while he visited me on his recent westward trek, we doped out much that will never, alas, see print, and some stuff that eventually went into the making of the story.

"A clipping concerning the artificial production of multiple births by inducing the egg cell to divide gave me the idea of an emanation creating a wholesale birth of twin creatures.

"A philosophical argument I once had with a prof in Psych. 1B – about the inter-relation of emotion and intelligence, what would happen if we could divorce the two – gave me the Intellectuals and Emotionals. That fitted, so, I dropped it in the pot and stirred.

"The gyroscope was dignified by an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, no less, of some four years back... These and other disparate items made the hodgepodge of material that took a lot of hard writing to smooth out into a presentable yarn against the familiar background of strange Venusian life-forms and our hardboiled huntress, Miss, Carlyle. My, how I'd like to meet that gal!

"As usual, the monsters have terrestrial counterparts which most of the readers will identify (the Atlas crab grow from the Hercules beetle, the sea-squirrel from the incredibly oily albatross. etc.). Except the bolasbird. That was just a bit of whimsy designed to give a chuckle to people whose sense of humor is as cockeyed as mine... I sincerely hope some of the readers can find a few moments enjoyment in the yarn. That's my measure of success."

* * *

"The idea germ for 'Satellite Five' was born in what I think I may claim to be unique circumstances. During the terrible floods of last March I was living in the mountains not far from Los Angeles, and happened to find myself right in the middle of the very worst of it. My only near neighbor was completely wiped out – lost home, car, and everything and his caretaker was killed – and my own place escaped annihilation only by a miracle. For four days, since my own place was still in a dangerous spot all those trapped with me in that particular region were forced to live in a one-room cabin – two women, four men, and two dogs. It was bitterly cold, and all of us envied the chap with the dogs because they slept close to him and kept him warm, cussed him out good-naturedly and someone said, 'What we need right now instead of those pooches is a couple of healthy dragons. They'd warm this place up.'

"In the midst of all that terror and destruction, the old think tank began to function, and Cacus, the fire-breathing monster, was born. Though the fire-producing apparatus as revealed in the yarn may seem simple, I assure you it took quite a bit of digging to make it scientifically possible.

"Later, while still marooned in the mountains, food and messages were dropped to us from airplanes (whose pilots had an uncanny knack of dropping their sacks right into the river!). For the most part they were volunteer pilots with ancient crates I wouldn't dare sneeze at. That gave me the idea for the 'condemned patrol' on Ganymede.

"The rest of the story was mostly elbow grease and conference with my local scientific encyclopedia, Al Mussen, whose invaluable assistance certainly rates notice here."

* * *

"Like most stories of considerable length, 'Trouble on Titan' is the compound of several ideas. Chiefly, however, it's the result of two ideas.

"The first of these comes from Frank Buck himself, a gentleman in boots who has achieved some success as an imitator of Gerry Carlyle. Mr. Buck also writes, and in his writings I came across a brief article which discussed the most difficult phase of his profession.

"Believe it or not, catching 'em alive is infinitely easier than keeping 'em alive once they're caught. Creatures of the wild, whether from Africa or Venus, seldom thrive in captivity. To maintain their health, it is necessary for the captor to study in great detail their habits, likes and dislikes, etc.

"This need for thorough knowledge of a hunter's specimens, and the possibilities of disaster if the rule is ignored, was one of the ideas around which my yarn is built.

"The other springs from the fact that my father is interested in insect pest control, especially among citrus orchards. Even a casual survey of the woes of raising oranges brings one face to face with the pestiferous ant, who does more financial damage in a year than a flock of Nazi bombers.

"The ant, as some readers may know, has developed his own axis, with several stooges in the form of aphids and what-not. These have been worked into a symbiotic economic system that is nothing short of amazing.

"It is much too elaborate to discuss here; books are devoted to it. However, I took some ancient advice ("Go to the ant, thou sluggard!") and found it good; it gave me material which suggested what Gerry finds in this latest story: trouble. And plenty of it."

* * *

"'Siren Satellite' is an example of the lengths to which a writer will go in order to work out an idea with which he has become fascinated. The basic story germ for this novelette hit me one day as I was reading about the planet Jupiter.

"When I noticed how rapidly this incredible giant spins upon its axis (nine hours and a few minutes for one rotation) it occurred to me that possibly a centrifugal thrust is generated which might offset the planet's terrific gravity.

"This, seemingly, was an idea which had never occurred to any other writer, and I was quite tickled with the thought of throwing this factual bombshell into the ranks of science, via science fiction.

"However, a bout with a slide-rule showed that such centrifugal thrust, although it does exist, is insufficient to make any great difference with a person's weight at Jupiter's equator. Alas disappointment!

"But by that time I was so bedazzled with the idea of blossoming out as a mathematician that I determined to pick another heavenly body and adapt it, if

necessary, to my purpose. With the considerable help of Mr. Murray Lesser, one of Northrop Aircraft's eminent aeronautical engineers, this was done in theory, and then Triton was found to be most nearly similar to our postulated planet.

"Although it may be possible to demonstrate that Triton's gravity is not quite as I have rated it, I think the reader will find I have not otherwise tampered with the known facts."

* * *

Though the computer hadn't been invented, and the transistor and the internet weren't even dreamed of, when these stories were written, their entertainment value remains undiminished. Today, Gerry Carlyle remains, as "Femme Fatales" a website devoted to "Pulp's Crime-Fighting Heroines" notes, "an adventuress of the first water ... traveling to distant planets to collect exotic specimens to bring to Earth's zoos." Once you've joined her on her voyage to Earth's Moon to battle the menace of the Mercurian "Energy Eaters" and her expedition to Almussen's Comet to challenge the mystery of "The Seven Sleepers," you'll understand why science fiction giants like A. E. Van Vogt said, "I loved Gerry Carlyle. I wish I had created her."

Jean Marie Stine

2/27/02

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ASSIGNMENT ONE

THE ENERGY EATERS

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 woman. 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 angry I find myself dodging Whip's on Venus or shooting energy-storms on Mars. I need a vacation."

"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'd 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. Newscasters swarmed in the office; photographers snapped their flashbulbs continually; questions and shouts filled the place with babble. 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 Hotside."

"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 Hotside."

"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 flashbulbs 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 woman 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 Hotside, 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 woman'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 furlike 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 Hotside. 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 spacemail 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 television 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 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 *Thrilling Wonder 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'd you manage to get those things from Hotside."

"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 beam control."

"That's true," McColm said. "These – what 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 Hotside, 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 gobular bodies – in the green leaves of vegetation. They contain chlorophyll. 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 chlorophyll 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 Hotside. I compute that a Promethean needs one dry cell a week to keep it healthy."

The annunciator buzzed. Simultaneously Ailyn Van entered.

An unusual woman, 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 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 suddenly grinned. Though the creature bore no resemblance to anything human, it somehow managed to convey a perfect impression of an intoxicated reveler 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 stages, 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 woman 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 woman, 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 headwaiter, 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 cabbie thrust her head unwarily through the window to stare at this athletic marvel, and dived ungracefully out to crack her 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 autocars, 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 taxi scooted skillfully, 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 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.

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 photoelectric 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 her 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 toolled her 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 woman'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? 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 woman 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 woman, would think it only a trick on her part to gain possession of the Mercurians.

Gerry went off to investigate firsthand. 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 said 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."

She 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 too risk death every time they follow me. That takes something, Tony Anybody with a few billion 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."

"Do 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 woman'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 woman 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 woman'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, handpicked 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 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 woman 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 narrow opening.

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

"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 an 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 lunged 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 woman sank down into a chair and lit a cigarette. "Well?" she inquired. "What's keeping you?"

Quade bushed. "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 scriptwriters grinding out a story. Have a special premier at Froman's Mercurian Theater – 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 the 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 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.

"Gerri – 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 woman 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 ultraviolet, 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!"

ASSIGNMENT TWO

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS

CHAPTER I

Call of the Comet

THE GREAT lens in the Mount Everest Observatory had withstood the stresses of the coldest climate and the highest altitude on Earth. Nobody had foreseen that Gerry Carlyle would ever use it. But when she did, the baleful gleam in her eye was enough to chip the telescopes beryllium steel.

Gerry was mad. She had flown into a fury to keep from crying. As Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle, the Solar System's greatest explorer, she dared never in her own estimation, be considered guilty of feminine weaknesses. What she wanted, she got, by virtue of a keen, alert, indomitable courage, and experience that covered practically every one of the Sun's planets.

Now, watching on the huge telescope visiplat the glowing fires of Almussen's Comet, she realized that she was losing the biggest scoop of her wild career.

The worst of it was that Gerry needed that scoop. The London Zoo paid her chiefly on commission. But she had to provide good, regular salaries for her staff. And she had never saved much, for there was always new equipment to buy, expensive research to pay for. The upkeep of The Ark alone was staggering. For months now Gerry hadn't found a new monster. The Ark was being completely overhauled and modernized, and money was getting low.

The last factor didn't bother her too much. She had to provide for her men, of course, but the real danger was losing her commission. She hated the idea of being idle in her beloved job when all the monsters in the System had not yet been captured and caged. The thrill of pitting her brain against the resources of alien worlds and incredible beings to bring them back to the Zoo alive, the excitement of skirting the brink of death and coming back unscathed, meant everything to her.

Now one of the greatest enigmas of interplanetary deep space was coming within reach. But Gerry couldn't move. She was earthbound as the most amazing scientific adventure of her lifetime was thundering into the void as Almussen's Comet swept Sunward.

Right now Gerry stood motionless in the middle of the room, which didn't much resemble an observatory. It was a small, well-furnished cubicle, the duplicate of a dozen others, each equipped with a visiplat connected with the gigantic telescope. She looked bitterly at the pallid fires of the comet, and could have stamped in frustrated annoyance.

A small televisor in the corner buzzed. "Calling Miss Carlyle... Call from London..."

The woman swung toward the device and touched a switch. On the screen, a man's worried face appeared.

"Well?" Gerry snapped.

"I'm terribly sorry," the face said apprehensively. "But the Jan Hallek Mercury expedition can't possibly be back for at least a month. And even then his ship would have to be overhauled thoroughly and specially adapted for your purposes and—"

Furiously, Gerry switched off the communicator. She resumed her pacing, cursing a fate that seemed to chain her to the Earth, at the same time the greatest opportunity of her lifetime sailed nonchalantly past through the skies, never to return.

Occasionally the televisor buzzed, and apologetic faces reported more sad news. Then the door opened and a tall, dark young man entered. He looked hot and harassed as he slung his dress cap halfway across the room and dropped into an easy chair.

"Well, Captain Strike?" Gerry's razor tongue sliced out. "Before you fall asleep, you might inform me of your progress."

Tommy Strike grinned wryly. "You know the answer, kitten—"

"Don't call me kitten."

"Cat," Tommy amended. "The Ark is absolutely out of the picture. Every motor in

her hull's been torn completely apart, for checking over. She won't be going anywhere for a long, long time... And, by the way, I can see you're in an evil temper."

"I'm not!"

"So let me warn you not to take it out on me, because I'm not feeling very gay myself. On the slightest provocation, I'm going to turn you over my knee and give you a whaling."

Gerry glanced keenly at the usually easy-going Tommy, and decided that he meant what he said. She smiled ruefully, and turned as the door opened once more.

A small man, with a face like a pallid prune, came in. Spectacles glinted from amid the wrinkles. A badly fitting toupee was askew on the head of Professor Langley of the Mount Everest Observatory.

"Um, Miss Carlyle," said Langley, in a squeaky voice. "I have collected the data you desired." He referred to a scrap of paper clutched in one hand, and began to read in a swift, monotonous voice. "Almussen's Comet is one of the largest ever to enter the Solar System. Its nucleus is eight thousand miles, almost as large as that of Donati's Comet of Eighteen Fifty-eight. And it seems to be much denser, probably dense enough to support the weight of a human being."

"Tommy!" Gerry's eyes were alight with excitement. "Do you hear?"

Strike nodded slowly, frowning. He realized that this information only made it harder for Gerry, because she couldn't take advantage of it.

"Um. The nucleus is not quite as large as our own Moon. The comet seems to be one of the long period comets, or perhaps a wanderer of space, not a part of our System at all. In other words" – even Langley's cold voice was pained – "we shall never see its return in our lifetimes."

Gerry chewed her lip. Strike glanced at her and then quickly looked away.

"Cyanogen is present in great quantities, also sodium, common metals, such as iron and bauxite, and the hydrocarbons."

"Hydrocarbons," Gerry said. "That may mean – life."

Langley knitted his brows. "On a comet? Rather fantastic, Miss Carlyle."

"I've run across life-forms existing in much less probable conditions," the woman said stubbornly.

"And how would you reach the comet?" Langley asked.

"How do you suppose?" Gerry asked defiantly. "Crawl on my hands and knees?" But her voice was bitter – hurt and bewildered by her helplessness.

CHAPTER II

A Challenge for Gerry

Langley permitted himself the luxury of a faint smile.

"It would take a specially equipped ship. Comets don't only shine by reflected light. The Sun's light and electron streams also excite their tenuous gases. But more important, they are electrically charged. You must have protection against the electronic bombardment of the coma – which is much larger than the nucleus. A head may be from eighteen thousand to a million, nine hundred thousand miles in diameter, while the nucleus is from four hundred forty yards to eight thousand miles. It would be like entering the Sun's chromosphere."

"Not quite," Gerry said thoughtfully. "It could be done. Am I right?"

The professor pondered. "Yes," he admitted at last. "It might be done. And there might be life on the comet. But if so, it would be so utterly alien, that it would be incomprehensible to a human being."

"What a scoop," Gerry murmured ecstatically.

Repelled by this unscientific attitude Langley withdrew, ostentatiously shutting the door behind him. The woman turned to Strike.

"I know," he said. "It's tough. Not a ship in the System—" He stopped suddenly.

"No," Gerry sighed defeatedly. "Nothing. And no time to prepare one. Not a crate that would take us to the comet."

"Mm-m." Strike unpocketed a battered pipe and sucked at it, an enigmatic expression on his space-tanned face.

For a moment there was silence, while Gerry leaned back to scrutinize her man.

"Why the reticence?" she asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact there is a big ship being prepared to tackle the comet. I

heard of it in a roundabout way. Supposed to be kept secret till the takeoff. Then there'll be a great fanfare of publicity."

Gerry clutched Strike's shoulders.

"Why, you... Why didn't you say so before? Who's handling it? I'll get in touch with 'em right away..."

She paused. Tommy had mentioned a fanfare of publicity. He had been reluctant to broach the matter at all. A horrible suspicion seeped into her mind.

"Good Lord!" she cried. "Don't tell me Nine Planets Pictures is disrupting my life again."

Tommy Strike stood up.

"Now look, kitten. There's no use losing your temper."

"Well, blast me," was all Gerry said. But she made it sound like a searing oath.

"In fact, it might be a good idea to swallow your pride and make a deal with 'em. It's your only chance."

"Oh, is that so?" Gerry snapped. "Hollywood on the Moon. Nine Planets Films, Incorporated. The biggest bunch of crooked fakers in the System. They duplicate the life-forms I've captured at the risk of my life – Venusian whips, Jovian thunderdragons. And how do they do it? They make cheap robots. Radio-controlled robots at that. That's what gets in my hair, Tommy. I take all the risks, and they grab the credit and the cash."

"They make good pictures," Strike said. That was a tactical mistake.

"Good?" Gerry almost sputtered. "Corny, you mean. You can't duplicate life-forms even with biologically created robots. But the public goes to Nine Planets' pictures and stays away from the London Zoo. Do you think that's fair?"

"Oh, well," Strike soothed, "this Quade, the guy who's in charge isn't such a bad egg, from all I hear. He ought to be willing to give us a lift."

"Quade? Their ace trouble-shooter? The man who doublecrossed me by taking newsreel shots when I wasn't looking?" Gerry looked ready to explode. But, suddenly and inexplicably, she quieted. A gleam came into her eye.

"I see," she went on, after a pause. "Maybe you're right. Quade ought to be willing to give us a lift. And if he does – if I once get on that comet—" Gerry's smile became sweetly ferocious. "Mr. Quade will find out just what it means to be double-crossed."

Strike's jaw dropped. "Lord help Quade," he whispered under his breath. "Lord help him."

One day later, Gerry reached the Moon. She came unheralded, bursting upon the horizon of Nine Planets like a nova. Nobody was expecting her, and Tony Quade with his boss, Von Zorn, lolled unsuspectingly in a Turkish bath on Lunar Boulevard.

Everybody in the System wanted to visit Hollywood on the Moon, the most glamorous, fascinating, incredible city ever built. It lay on the other side of the Moon, away from Earth, in a vast hollow that volcanic activity had blasted out eons before. There, nestled under the Great Rim, glowed and sparkled Hollywood on the Moon, Mecca of the Movie Makers. It had the advantages of a perfect artificial atmosphere and climate, which therefore made it vacation-land for the elite and the socialite. For the studio men, it was a place of arduous, grueling, but utterly interesting work.

Here Nine Planets Films, Inc. had its headquarters. Here the interplanetary sagas were plotted and planned by ingenious script writers. Here the technical experts consulted, the experimental labs created robot-life-forms and artificial other-worldly conditions. And here Von Zorn ruled like a czar. He was the President of Nine Planets and Tony Quade was his ace man. When Von Zorn was in a spot, when experts said a picture couldn't be canned, he sent for Quade. And Quade had always proved the experts wrong.

Quade was the one who got the first four-dimensional films ever made. He was the daredevil maniac who captured the spectacularly deadly Plutonian life-forms on celluloid. He even shot the great Martian Inferno, the hottest SRO grosser in years. Against her will and without her knowledge, he had once filmed Gerry Carlyle. After Gerry Carlyle it was only a step to a comet.

Though Quade was worried, he didn't show it.

There was no point in explaining to Von Zorn that the chances of returning from the comet alive were practically zero.

Quade listened hard, peering through clouds of steam. The acrid stimulation of Martian sour-grass tickled his nostrils. Weirdly swathed figures loomed momentarily through thin spots in the mist, then disappeared. There were strangely muffled voices, heavy breathing, the sound of wet feet slapping on glass-tile.

"And in the office it's spies everywhere," Von Zorn said excitedly. "Try to keep secrets with gossip columnists and fan mag writers searching like vultures, and slickers from the other companies trying to scoop us. A Turkish bath is the only place I feel safe...Tony, we're set. The ship's almost ready. The special shields are done, and the equipment's being put in right on our own lot, the abandoned Thunder

Men set near the Rim. But we've got to keep it quiet for awhile longer."

Quade's lanky, hard-muscled figure stirred uneasily. His lean, tanned face was impassive as he studied the remarkable form of his employer. Quade was trying not to laugh.

Von Zorn resembled two eggs, the smaller atop the larger, with strange, limp appendages sprouting in the form of arms and legs. He was as peculiar a life-form as Quade had ever filmed. No one would have guessed that inside that bristle-thatched head was one of the shrewdest executive brains of the System. Von Zorn dominated his whole gigantic plant, from the highest-paid star to the lowliest grip.

"Keep it quiet awhile longer," Von Zorn repeated. "Scientists, reporters, everybody in the Universe will want to go along the minute they find out that we're tackling the comet. We have to refuse 'em, and that makes bad publicity."

Von Zorn lived in terms of box-office receipts and publicity.

"When we do break the news, it's on the eve of the take-off," he continued. "No time for anybody to get their feelings hurt. See? Besides, this is a moving picture venture, Tony. You're going to get the pix of a lifetime. Sensational background for our super-epic of cosmic adventure—"

"Yeah. I know. *Call of the Comet*. Starring so-and-so. Produced by so-and-so. And maybe a tiny, buried screen credit for Quade, cameraman."

"No, I'm making you associate producer for this one," cried Von Zorn, on the spur of the moment. "Maybe director, too. Who knows? Your name in lights—"

A door opened somewhere, and a draught of cool air surged in.

"Mr. Von Zorn," a voice called. "Mr. Von Zorn!"

"Well?" Von Zorn yelled back, grateful for the interruption.

"There's a lady outside to see you. Says her name's Gerry Carlyle. That's what she says, honest."

Quade looked at Von Zorn. Von Zorn looked at Quade.

"Tell her I'm out," the film magnate yelped. "I'm speaking to nobody. I'm under a doctor's care. I'm a sick man!"

"She says if you ain't out in five minutes, she's comin' in," the attendant said apologetically. .

"She wouldn't dare," Von Zorn sputtered.

Quade suddenly intervened. "Don't kid yourself, Chief. That dame'll charge in here the way she walks into a pack of wild animals. We'd better take a shower and talk to her. Mr. Von Zorn's office in fifteen minutes," he said to the attendant.

"But get this straight, Chief," he said when they were comparatively alone again. "That rocket in skirts isn't going to join any expedition I'm running."

Gerry and Strike were waiting as Von Zorn and Quade, freshly groomed and still smelling faintly of sour-grass, entered. Von Zorn strutted around his vast desk and eyed Gerry across its glassy expanse as one might scout an enemy across a battlefield.

"Ah, Strike," he said. "Met you before, I think. Guess every-one knows everyone else except maybe you and Quade. Tony Quade, Strike."

As the two men advanced warily to shake hands, they looked each other over very carefully. They were well matched physically, though Quade was perhaps a bit taller. Despite himself, Strike couldn't help liking what he saw before him.

Gerry started the ball rolling. "You owe me a debt of gratitude, Mr. Von Zorn, for that affair of the energy-eaters. It's probably bad taste to mention it, but I'm desperate to get to Almussen's Comet while it's still possible to do so."

Von Zorn's simian face beamed at her proposal.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "We haven't always seen eye to eye in the past, Miss Carlyle, but bygones can be bygones. If you, Strike and a few of your men want to go along, it could be arranged."

Gerry rocked on her heels, jolted with amazement. This was too easy.

"You mean we can make a bargain?" she gasped.

"I mean I can make a bargain," Von Zorn amended shrewdly.

"Chief," Quade said urgently. "Remember what I told you."

Nobody paid him the slightest attention.

"All right," Gerry grudged. "You're calling the turn."

"Well, first off, this is a movie expedition. The idea is to take pictures. After we have our background shots for later double-exposures, it's okay to mess around. I don't think there's any organic life on the comet. But if there is, you're the woman who can catch what's there. You bring back two of each life-form you find there. One goes to Nine Planets, and the other to the London Zoo. But if you bring back

only one specimen, it belongs to Nine Planets.

"It's for my own protection," Von Zorn went on. "Your exhibits have got the public down on my synthetic movie monsters. If there are any real ones to be had, I'm using them in *Call of the Comet*. That's how I'm going to overcome public prejudice—"

"Chief!" Quade broke in.

"I agree," Gerry said. Her eyes had taken on a keen glint. "Tommy, myself and six of my best men. We'll have our equipment ready within twenty-four hours."

Quade's mouth was a single hard line. "Chief, I want to talk to you," he began menacingly.

Von Zorn hesitated. When he glimpsed Tony's narrowed eyes, he nodded.

"All right. Will you excuse us, Miss Carlyle?"

The woman smiled brilliantly and left, with Strike. As the door shut, Quade turned blazing eyes on his employer.

"I quit," he stormed. "You can't double-cross me like that."

"Now, now." Von Zorn raised placating hands. "Don't jump to conclusions Tony. I have your best interests at heart. You know that."

"Yeah? I told you once that dame slides in, I step out."

"But why? You want to film this picture. It's the biggest break you've ever had. Your name as associate producer? No, I'll make it producer. Tony, I'll let you in on something. I've planned this all along – to get Gerry Carlyle interested."

"What?" Quade demanded in horror.

"Sure. Figure it out. Think of the publicity when Gerry Carlyle goes on a Nine Planets expedition to the comet. Our picture will be the box office sock of the century. It'll break all records for that one reason alone. And you'll have the credit."

"I see," Quade said slowly. He rubbed his lean jaw and eyed Von Zorn. "Maybe... Well, we'll see. I still don't trust you. You'd cut your grandmother's throat for the publicity. But I'm not going to stay here on the Moon and let Gerry Carlyle take over my job."

"I'd hate to put somebody else in your place," Von Zorn murmured gently.

"I get it. Okay, it's a deal. But I can tell you this right now. That Carlyle dame is out

to doublecross me. I can smell it."

"Afraid of a woman?" Von Zorn taunted.

Quade smiled unpleasantly. "Afraid? Nope. I'm going to show Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle just what doublecrossing really means."

He went out. Von Zorn looked after his ace man and blinked. His simian face twisted into a wry grin.

"Lord help Gerry Carlyle!" he whispered under his breath.

CHAPTER III

Oil and Water

As the hours dragged past, it became apparent that Gerry and Quade were mixing like oil and water. The chief bone of contention lay in the preparations for the voyage. Despite the huge size of the supership, every available inch would be utilized for equipment.

What sort of equipment?

Gerry had her own ideas. As an explorer of some experience, she knew the vital necessity of preparing for every contingency. Gas-guns, complicated snares and traps, special lures, weapons, protective devices, a hundred and one other gadgets were rushed from the woman's London headquarters through space to Hollywood on the Moon. Meanwhile, Quade grimly superintended the installation of special cameras, complicated lighting facilities, ranging from hydrocarbon to ultraviolet, cases of various lenses, telescopic, microscopic, spectroscopic, electroscopic...

"Hell," snapped Quade to Gerry as they stood in the ship's port, violently arguing. "The business is to film whatever's on Almussen's Comet. What's the use of all this junk of yours? Do you think we'll find dinosaurs?"

"We might," Gerry said maliciously. "And if we do, you'd look swell trying to down one with a camera. It doesn't pay to take chances in my business. You'll learn."

"Oh, I'll learn, will I?" Quade breathed hoarsely. "Listen, young lady, I was canning films from Venus to Pluto before you crawled out of your cradle."

This was a lie, but Gerry chose to take it seriously. Her blue eyes widened

innocently.

"You must tell me all about it sometime," she pleaded. "Later, though. Right now I'm going to throw away that overgrown toy so I can find some room to get my hypnotic lure into the ship."

She nodded distastefully toward Quade's bloated three-dimensional camera.

"Hypnotic lure," said Quade bitterly, eyeing an over-sized gadget composed chiefly of revolving mirrors and varicolored light tubes.

Tommy Strike wandered along at this moment. He marched quickly to the angry pair.

"Hello," he said with forced geniality. "I was just going down to the Silver Space Suit for a bit. Come along, Gerry? Quade?"

"Can't," the movie man grunted. "Too busy. Things are getting in my hair."

He cast a baleful glance at Gerry, who smiled radiantly and nodded at Strike.

"Be right with you, Tommy. I'll clean up a bit."

She departed in search of lipstick.

Quade asked intently, when the woman had gone, "Do you really like being around poison ivy? For two cents I'd throw up this business and go fishing. The mariloca are running now."

"And you want to follow their example, eh?" Strike asked.

"It isn't as bad as all that. You just don't-er-understand Gerry."

"Oh, so that's it," said Quade. "I was wondering. Hell, why does she want to fill the ship with her mousetraps when we need most of the space for camera equipment? We don't know what conditions we'll find on the comet, and we've got to be prepared for every emergency. A cyanogen atmosphere needs special lenses and films."

"Sure," Strike placated. "You're right as far as that goes. But Gerry's right, too. She doesn't know what sort of life we may find on the comet, if any. And we've got to be prepared for anything. Bullets don't work on some creatures, and gas won't work on others. You can lure whiz-bangs with tobacco smoke, but it takes infra-red light to attract a Hyclops.

"I've seen the time when Gerry's forethought in taking along one little gadget, which we never expected to use, saved our lives and netted us big dough. Maybe you'll get

the best picture in the world, Quade. But it won't mean anything if you're killed because we didn't bring the right weapon with us."

Quade nodded. "Maybe. I see your point. Well, as long as that cyclone in skirts stops riding me, I can take it. I'll try, anyway."

He strode away hastily as Gerry appeared, trim and dapper in jodhpurs and shimmering metalumen blouse. She looked ravishing.

"How can anyone so lovely have such a bad temper?" he murmured, steering Gerry toward a taxicab. "Some time you're going to die of spontaneous combustion."

"Oh, you've been talking to that animated camera," the woman remarked. "Well, can you blame me? You know how much good equipment means."

They were rolling along Lunar Boulevard when Gerry spoke again. "Well? Don't you agree?"

"More or less." Strike lit a cigarette by drawing deeply on it, so a speck of platinum black, embedded in the tobacco, was kindled into flame. "Less, if you want it. You're only seeing your side, Gerry. After all, Quade's job is to shoot a picture. Or the backgrounds, anyway. Put yourself in his place."

Gerry wrinkled her nose distastefully and said not another word till they were seated in the Dome Room of the Silver Space Suit. Then she finally relented and smiled at Strike.

"You win," she said. "I'll be good. If you'll dance with me."

The orchestra was just plunging into the opening chords of that latest smash hit, *Swinging the Libration*. Gerry and Strike accordingly rose and liberated in the current mode. Gerry sighed.

"What's the matter?"

"These jodhpurs," the woman said disconsolately. "Wish I had on a dress – organdy-blue."

By which it appears that *Catch-'em-Alive* Carlyle was somewhat feminine after all. . .

Events marched ahead. Hollywood on the Moon raced against the comet's thundering drive as it swept in toward the Sun. Nine Planets' corps of scientists worked frantically. All the complicated machinery of the technical side of the movie industry swung into well-oiled cooperative movement. Bulletins were placed hourly on Quade's desk.

But then a new and dangerous factor entered the situation – time.

The comet would swing extremely close to the Sun. Unchecked solar radiation would be fatal to any life on the comet.

An insulated ship can exist for a short time on Mercury, and even narrow-beam radio communication is possible there. But Almussen's Comet would swing well within Mercury's orbit. At that distance, the Sun's tremendous radiations would instantly short-circuit a human brain coming into range. Not even the special armor would help. Moreover, the comet's mass might set up solar tides. If that happened, the strange intergalactic wanderer would be swallowed in colossal cataracts of solid flame.

Quade and Gerry had only a few weeks, therefore, to complete their preparations, make the voyage, and achieve their aims.

Another danger that occurred to most speculative minds was luckily not apt to materialize. The small mass of the average comet could not upset the delicate balance of the Solar System. Almussen's Comet, though, had a solid core, massive enough to raise energy storms on the Sun's surface – and sufficient to deflect a large asteroid or even a small planet from its orbit, Jupiter was safe enough, and even Earth. But Mercury might succumb.

By a lucky chance, however, the comet would not pass sufficiently close to any of the inner planets to cause serious trouble.

Quade insisted that the ship be checked and triple-checked. He admitted frankly that he was apprehensive. If the vessel happened to be wrecked on the comet's surface, the inevitable result would be death when the Sun neared the smaller body.

Both Gerry Carlyle and Tony Quade had been in dangerous spots from Pluto to Mercury Hotside. But this was the most perilous voyage either had ever undertaken.

They did not underestimate the possibility of disaster. The electronic bombardment of the comet's coma might mean destruction at the very start of the quest. A special double hull had been constructed, which further increased the bulk of the unwieldy ship. But it had not been built for maneuverability, so that didn't matter.

Gerry was considerably irritated by Von Zorn's insistence on filming in detail all the preparations for the voyage. It seemed to her that the cameramen, at Quade's instigation, always took special pains to wait till her hair was mussed and her lipstick smeared.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the obstacles, the day of the takeoff at last arrived.

It was spectacular enough to satisfy even Von Zorn. Gerry, who was decidedly photogenic, was induced to pose for some pictures. Strike, Quade and the crew

were included. But the human actors in the drama were dwarfed by the background, more impressive than any constructed set.

In the distance towered the ultra-modern pleasure and business buildings of Hollywood on the Moon – the Silver Space Suit, the studios, the great transparent globe of the sanitarium. Above everything else glowered the jagged ramp of the Great Rim that bounded the crater. Above, misty through the artificial atmosphere, glowed the stars. The Earth, naturally, was invisible. Only on the other side of the Moon could it be seen.

And in the foreground – the ship. Ovoid, squatty enormous, glistening under the arclights, it lay in the center of the field like a vast metallic jewel. And a jewel of science it was, with the best equipment that the resource of Von Zorn could provide. At the last moment there had been a fanfare of publicity. A tremendous crowd was present to see the takeoff.

Gerry was bored, Quade irritated by the waste of time. But Tommy enjoyed all the fuss.

"Nice place," said Strike pleasantly. "I think I'd make a swell movie star."

"Doubling for a Venus glider?" Gerry inquired with heavy irony. "After all, I'm employing you, Captain Strike. A little cooperation—"

"Okay, buttercup," Tommy said jauntily, to Gerry's scarlet embarrassment, since Quade was within earshot. The latter said nothing, but his grin was most expressive as he continued on his way to the controls.

CHAPTER IV

Trapped – Alive!

A flare of rockets thundered up, music boomed out, and the Silver Space Suit quartet began to chant the Spaceman's Song. Anti-gravity screens quivered as energy pulsed through them from the powerful motors.

In the control room, Gerry was flung into Strike's arms as the ship lurched. Quade's fingers flickered rapidly over a score of buttons. His grin had vanished, his jaw jutted noticeably. There was sudden tension in his attitude.

The vessel swung heavily to the left, then to the right. Abruptly it bucked like a

bronco. Then it regained an even keel, and slowly, heavily, it began to mount

"Whew," said Quade without relaxing. "What a crate. You can't maneuver the damn thing at all. If we'd been using old-style rockets, we'd have cracked up muy pronto."

"But we can reach the comet, can't we?" Gerry said worriedly.

"Yeah. We do have speed. But no maneuverability. It'll be plenty risky, piloting this jalopy through the asteroid belt."

Quade's lean face was grim as he studied the visiplat showing his course.

"We head out and intercept the comet in the major planet zone," Strike said. "That'll give us a certain amount of time before the comet gets too close to the Sun."

"I'm jamming on acceleration," Quade nodded. "But we can't meet the comet head on. We'd pass it – we couldn't decelerate swiftly enough. We've got to curve around, slanting through the coma, and that's the most dangerous part. To do that we had to sacrifice either protection or maneuverability, and we've plenty of protection. But not enough, maybe, if we slant through the coma instead of driving straight in. I don't know how much electronic bombardment the hull will stand." He shrugged wryly.

Quade was right. It was a perilous venture. Most ships, with their controlled gravity-screens, were able to turn or stop on a micron. But the bulk of this special vessel defeated its own purpose to some extent. She was a bulking, lumbering, leviathan, and yet potentially vulnerable to the dangerous menace of the comet. Now she streaked out from the Moon with mad disregard for trespassers in her path.

Space traffic had been warned. A lane had been cleared. An intricate chart and map was before Quade, citing the orbit of every known asteroid and meteor in his route. The hull repellers were turned on full power, to give warning of any large body nearby. No other precautions could be taken, unless the crew wore space armor day and night.

It was the asteroid belt which provided the greatest obstacle. The outer hull was riddled by hundreds of punctures. A smaller vessel could have slid through the uncharted meteorite swarm. Quade's craft could not, though he managed to avoid the main body, which would have ruined the ship completely.

The repellers blew out with a terrific crash under the strain of trying to throw off countless small but massive bodies. But the second hull, built of super-steel, withstood the slackened speed of most of the interplanetary missiles. A few got through, but emergency valves were immediately employed.

Two gravity-screens were destroyed

The ship thundered on amidst the stars. Inside the control cabin, there was blank silence. Quade, Gerry, and Strike looked at one another in dismay.

Quade was the first to recover. He flicked over an audiophone switch and yelled commands. Emergency galvanized him into an energetic dynamo.

"Morgan, mobilize the crew. Get a report right away. Let me know the extent of the damage. Prepare space suits for outside repairs."

"Yes, sir."

"Outside repairs?" Gerry said. "We're nearly at the comet."

"So what?" Quade asked. "We're not taking this boat into the coma with a weakened hull. Even after repair it'll be plenty risky."

"But we may enter the coma any time. If your crew is outside then"

Her pause was significant.

"It'll be a volunteer job," Quade replied grimly. He turned to the audiophone again. "Well?"

"All the men have volunteered, Tony," Morgan reported briefly. He went on to list the damage.

"Issue space suits. Put enough men inside to take care of that job. Get volunteers to go outside. Be with you right away. Send up an emergency pilot to handle the ship."

"Oh. You're going out too," Gerry said.

"Yeah."

"So am I," Tommy Strike remarked happily. "Every little bit helps."

He turned to the door.

"Tommy!" Gerry cried. "No. You can't." She hesitated, breathing hard. "If you do, I'm going too."

Quade intervened. "We need every man we can get. But volunteers only. Strike doesn't have to go."

"Listen, Gerry, I'm going out and you're going to stay here," Tommy said. "You can help by piloting the boat, so the emergency pilot can go outside with us. As Tony says, we need every hand."

Gerry, about to remonstrate, caught Quade's eye. There was a satirical look in it, as though the movie man expected Gerry to display some 'feminine' reaction, perhaps even throw a fit. The woman's lips tightened.

"Right," she said succinctly. "Scram, boys."

Quade and Strike went out. Gerry turned to the controls. Her gaze went to the visiplat, to the glowing menace of the comet dangerously near. A red spark on the screen showed the progress of the ship. Gerry blinked rapidly.

Meanwhile, Quade was mobilizing his men. Some were already working on the wall of the ship, welding on emergency patches hastily brought from the storerooms. Others were struggling into space suits and lining up before the air-locks. Some were entering the inner hull of the craft, protected by their armor, bearing with them the necessary tools.

Most of the welding machines were mounted on universal ball-bearing tripods of light metal that could be rolled easily across the hull. In each device was a small gravity-control unit, so the machine could be fixed firmly in place for the actual repair work. Quade superintended the exodus.

Outside the air-lock, clad in his armor and transparent helmet of flexible glass, he started the first unit of men at the ship's prow. It would have been impossible to locate each microscopic puncture in the huge area of the hull. But as the crew emerged, each picked up a portable tank, equipped with a flexible hose which ended in a round disc, easily seven feet in diameter.

A man would place this disc flat against the hull, turn a nozzle in the tank, and walk quickly forward, dragging the hose after him. The mass of the ship, coupled with the suits' gravityunits, made this means of progression possible. In the trail of each disc, a smear of sticky substance gleamed whitely, congealing immediately in the vacuum of space. Soon a good portion of the hull was completely plated with the stuff.

Tony Quade barked an order into his suit's audiophone. Inside the vessel, a man turned a screw, letting into the forward compartments of the hull a special gas that expanded swiftly. Where punctures occurred in the outer hull, the elastic coating exploded into huge bubbles, black in contrast to the surrounding whiteness. These marked the goal of dozens of men, hurrying toward the punctures with their welding units.

It was a remarkable example of well-trained coordination. Strike, busy dragging a hose and disc toward the stern, was impressed. He looked at Quade with renewed respect. More than once, he glanced ahead at the tremendous sweep of the comet, blotting out half the heavens.

Black void, star-speckled, lay all around. The men worked in airless emptiness, with the Sun a far disc astern. The pallid glare of Almussen's Comet threw their weirdly

elongated shadows grotesquely along the hull. In the absence of air the sharp contrast between light and darkness was striking. The helmet lights, naturally, threw no beams, since there were no air-motes to reflect the illumination.

Inside the ship Gerry Carlyle sat at the controls, her face drained of all color, and grimly drove the vessel at top speed toward the comet. Inexorably the red dot on the visiplat screen crept toward the white boundary of the coma. When it entered it, any man still outside the ship would die instantly under the terrific electronic bombardment.

And Tommy Strike was out there. That was the only thought she could get through her mind.

Every man in the crew realized the peril. Tony Quade had grimly explained the dangers. But not one thought of giving up his job, though the comet was the target of apprehensive glances. Welding machines clamped pneumatically against the hull. Pale fires sputtered and blazed. Slowly, in an eternity, the crippled giant was mended.

But its race through the void continued unchecked. In the control room, Gerry Carlyle gnawed her lips and watched the red dot leap swiftly toward the white circle of the comet's head.

Two inches lay between. At this speed, the gap would be bridged all too soon. Gerry's hand hovered momentarily over a button, and then drew back. No. Deceleration must not begin yet. But there was so little time!

The audiophone skirled. Quade's voice rasped out, clipped and staccato.

"What's the distance? How much time have we?" Gerry made a quick computation and told him. The movie man whistled.

"Yeah. Well, follow the course. See you soon."

"Quade—" Gerry said.

"What?"

"Nothing," the woman whispered, and turned back to the controls. There were dark shadows under her eyes. Danger for herself she could face without flinching. But this was something entirely different. If Strike died under the electronic bombardment, it would be her hand that had killed him. Strained reasoning, perhaps – but Gerry loved her man.

She looked at the visiplat. Suddenly she became conscious that she had been holding her breath for some time. The woman exhaled deeply and tried to relax. It was useless.

The red speck crawled toward the comet. It was less than an inch away.

Half an inch.

All the future crawled by her. Gerry was immobile at the controls. There was hell in her eyes. No sound came to her from the outside hull. She could guess nothing of what was happening there. And that was, perhaps, the worst. She didn't know whether Strike was still alive or not. Should she call Quade on the audiophone?

A quarter of an inch, and the gap still narrowed.

The red speck touched the white circle.

Gerry's iron control snapped. She flicked a switch, called: "Quade! We're in the coma—"

"Hold it, kid," said a low voice behind her. The woman whirled, pivoting on her seat. Tommy Strike, disheveled but grinning, was standing on the threshold, unzipping his space suit. Behind him came Quade, his face glistening with perspiration.

Gerry's reaction was instantaneous.

"It's about time," she snapped. "I've been—"

And then the tornado struck!

Only a super-ship could have withstood it even for a moment. The electronic bombardment would have destroyed an ordinary liner instantly. Gerry spun back toward the control panel. Her slim fingers played the keyboard like a pianist's. The vessel rocked, shuddered, swayed, screaming in tortured agony.

No meteorite-storm, this. The very fabric of matter was the target for a blast of pure, unadulterated energy that raved and tore at the hull. Refrigerators rose into a shrill, high-pitched whine of incredible power.

Nevertheless the outer hull glowed red. The weak patches flared into white incandescence.

The skeleton of the ship strained and stretched as though on the rack. Girders and struts of toughest metal screeched. Gerry felt a warning tingle in her fingertips.

Quade sprang to the audiophone.

"Special suits on," he shouted. "Double-quick, every man!"

He dragged three black suits from a locker, threw one to Strike, donned one himself, and pushed Gerry from the controls with little tenderness.

"Get into it," he snapped, his mittened hands manipulating buttons. "Hurry."

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

Usually a space ship is silent. But now it was bedlam. The motors keened in rhythmic, throbbing pulsations. The visiplat glowed and paled. It showed nothing but a racing flood of white light. The instruments and gauges were haywire.

"Blind flying," Quade grunted. "If we crack up—"

He turned the ship into a narrowing spiral and began to decelerate. A bell rang warningly.

"One of the patches has gone out," Strike said. "Listen. I can go inside the hull with a welder and repair it."

"Wouldn't work," Quade snapped. "You wouldn't last three seconds."

"My armor—"

The movie man merely shook his head silently and bent over the controls. The ship drove on doggedly, battling an environment that no space craft had ever encountered in history. Searing, blasting fires of pure energy battered at the hull. Instruments were useless. Exposed metal began to glow with dim, faint fluorescence.

Quade was worrying about his precious film. Raw celluloid would have been rendered useless minutes ago. He had known that in advance. The special thin-wire film he had taken in lieu of it might resist the bombardment. But then it might not. There was no way to tell.

Suddenly, without warning, it was over. The crackling thunder of the storm died. The visiplat gave a last flare and became normal. It showed—

The nucleus of the comet! Something that had never been seen before by any human being.

Quade had a brief impression of a pale mass expanding with terrifying speed, a globe that rushed toward him like a thunderbolt. Small at first, it grew nearly to the Moon's size before he could decelerate. It was dangerous business. Swift deceleration would cause something worse than the bends — caisson disease — and a crack-up would mean insanity, death.

Quade swung the ship aside, circling the comet's body in a wide orbit. He could as yet make out no features of the sphere beneath him. The ship was moving too fast. He touched buttons.

The quick deceleration punched him in the stomach and slammed him against the padded control panel. Gerry and Strike went flying across the room, to bounce off the cushioned walls. That was the worst of it.

Quade pushed more buttons. The ship slowed down and spiraled inward. It wobbled badly. More of the gravity-screens had blown out.

"We've got to land for repairs," he said briefly. "Strike, check up on the damage."

Tommy nodded and went out. Gerry came to peer over Quade's shoulder at the visiplat.

"It looks – dead," she said. "No mountains or bodies of water. Just a featureless sphere, smaller than the Moon."

"Featureless?" Quade retorted. "Look over there."

Rising from the pale surface beneath them was a black structure, tiny in the distance, resembling a huge monolith or tower. It flashed past and was gone.

The vessel slanted down swiftly. It paused, hung in mid-air, dropped to a clumsy, lopsided landing.

"Whew!" Quade leaned back in his seat, relaxing for a few moments. "What a job."

He removed his helmet and wriggled out of the special suit.

"Well, we're here," he announced, sighing with relief.

Gerry watched Tony crunch a caffeine citrate tablet between his teeth and swallow it wryly.

"There's life here, Quade. That tower—"

"Looks like it. But we've got to take precautions."

"Exactly. The air here can't be breathable. I'll find out."

She examined the automatic atmosphere analyzer.

"Cyanogen," she said. "We can't breathe it, of course. We'll need space suits outside the ship at all times."

Quade pondered. "What sort of life-form can live in cyanogen?"

"Why not cyanogen instead of oxygen? I can't guess what the life-forms might look like. But there must be life. That tower proves it."

"First of all, though, we need rest and repairs," Quade said. "We don't want to be marooned here when the comet reaches the Sun." He barked orders into the audiophone, and rose to superintend matters. "None of the crew was hurt. That's lucky."

Events marched. For the nonce, Gerry was left out of things, and she didn't like it. Even Tommy Strike seemed to ignore her. He was always busy inside the hull, welding on a patch. The huntress wandered about for a time, frustration mounting within her.

At last she decided to take matters into her own small but capable hands. After all, she wasn't merely the supercargo.

She donned a space suit, pocketed a gas-gun and an explosive-projectile pistol, and let herself into a space-lock. The outer valve slid open. Gerry stepped out, closing the portal after her.

Loose, gritty gravel crunched under her booted feet. She looked toward a sharply curved horizon of low, rolling dunes, all apparently composed of the same substance. No vegetation was visible.

Well, that was logical enough, she thought. A comet, being made of a lot of loose particles bound together by mutual attraction, would have a fairly solid core. But the surface should be pretty much like deep, loose gravel. The stones themselves resembled granite – hard, gray, rounded by eons of friction.

Gerry looked up. A little thrill of awe shook her.

No sky stretched above. A flood of white flame was her heaven. She was inside the comet – within the coma! The vault above her was neither blue nor the starry black of space. It was pure white, seething and crawling in strange, vast tides, rippling in amazing perpetual motion.

These were all – the pale glory of the sky, the gravel dunes all around, and, behind Gerry, the towering bulk of the ship. But the woman had marked her direction well. She stepped out confidently in the direction where the black tower had reared.

She was, perhaps, too confident. But after all she was Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle. She had made certain that, if necessary, she could communicate with the ship by her suit's audiophone.

Gerry Carlyle, the first human being to stand on a comet's surface. A little smile

touched her red lips. That really meant something.

She hiked on doggedly. It was hard going, and the loose gravel made the muscles of her calves ache. She consulted a magnetic compass, which wasn't working. She shrugged and continued trudging. Gerry, of course, had an excellent sense of direction.

But the rolling dunes were utterly featureless, bathed in the shadow's white glow. The nucleus was a land of perpetual daylight...

On she went, and on. How far was the tower? A warning premonition touched Gerry. Perhaps she had been too rash. After all, this was a new world, with unknown and probably dangerous life-forms. But a glance at her weapons reassured her. She went on.

Something like a blue basketball rolled down the slope of a dune toward her.

Gerry stopped immediately. Her gloved hands went with deceptive casualness to the butts of her guns. She stood alert, waiting.

A blue basketball, a foot or so in diameter, stopped ten feet from Gerry. She was able to scrutinize it closely.

The bluish tinge was light, she saw, and the outer skin was translucent, almost transparent. Inside the globe a smaller black object floated, seemingly in liquid. There were no signs of any organs. Eyes, ears, respiratory apparatus, the thing had none of these.

It started to grow, with the speed of a nightmare mushroom.

It expanded to four feet in diameter before Gerry reacted. She read menace in the creature's actions, or thought she did. Her hand snapped the gas-gun from her belt.

Immediately the sphere vanished, disappeared like the figment of a dream. Where it had been was nothing.

Gerry stood frozen, wondering if the creature had exploded, or departed with incredible speed. But, instinctively, she knew that neither of these guesses was the correct one.

Some instinct made her turn. The blue sphere was rolling slowly toward her from the opposite direction, now nearly six feet in diameter.

Gerry pointed the gun, expecting her enemy to vanish. It did, promptly and thoroughly. The woman whirled. Two blue globes, now ten feet in diameter, were bearing down on her.

The interior body within the outer membrane had not expanded, and was still about six inches in diameter.

Gerry fired. The pellet hit the nearer of the things. Anesthetic gas spurted in a compact cloud. It did not a bit of damage. The globe expanded still further and advanced purposefully.

Gerry tried the explosive pistol. It was equally useless, for an entirely different reason. True, it blew the sphere to fragments, but when Gerry turned, six new ones, large and bluish, were stealthily approaching.

"It isn't real," Gerry said desperately to herself. "I'm going insane."

She suddenly thought of the audiophone. As she was about to use it, the nearest of the monsters arrested her attention.

On its aquamarine surface a picture was forming. It took shape, color, and size.

A three-dimensional reproduction of Gerry Carlyle appeared there.

"Good Lord," the woman whispered. "Are they intelligent, after all?"

Cautiously, she eyed her double. The reproduction of herself bent into a hoop-shape and began to roll rapidly forward.

On the screen of the globe's bluish outer membrane, the scene was amazingly vivid and realistic.

Then the pseudo-Gerry rose and began to walk, stiffly and jerkily. Gerry herself caught the idea. The monsters moved about by rolling. They must be wondering why this strange visitant did not progress in the same manner.

An idea occurred to Gerry. If she could make friends with the creatures, even lure one to the ship, it would be a considerable achievement.

She lifted one arm in the immemorial gesture of peace.

It was misunderstood. The nearest of the globes expanded to twenty feet, jumped forward, knocked Gerry flat. She clawed out her gun and blew it to bits, while trying to rise.

Another sphere materialized in the empty air above her. It smashed on her helmet, knocking the weapon from her hand. Its outer membrane folded elastically around the woman's space suit. She was lifted, struggling frantically.

The sphere began to roll up a gravel dune. Gerry caught flashing alternate glimpses of light and darkness.

She managed to turn on the audiophone and yell for help.

There was only a faint buzzing sound. The device was broken. The banging it had received had disrupted its delicate mechanism.

Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle had been caught – alive!

CHAPTER V

Mad World

Gerry wasn't missed from the ship immediately. There was too much to be done. Not even Tommy Strike noticed that she was gone until considerable time had elapsed. By that time, of course, it was too late.

"I've learned the value of a getaway," Quade told Tommy, in the midst of a hubbub of repair. "If we run into real trouble, we want to be able to scam. There's no use filming and capturing life-forms if we get stuck on the comet when it gets close to the Sun."

Strike nodded. "Right you are. But things ought to be well under control by now, eh?"

"They are. Where's your side-kick?" Quade demanded.

"I'll find out." Tommy went away. When he returned he looked puzzled, worried. "She's gone. And a suit's gone, too."

Quade swore helplessly. He turned to an audiophone and sent out a QRZ call.

"Calling Gerry Carlyle. QRZ-QRZ-Calling Gerry Carlyle."

There was no response.

"Well," Quade said at last, "we'll make sure she's not in the ship. But I feel pretty sure she isn't."

"She doesn't answer the call," Strike observed. "That means she can't."

There was orderly confusion. Presently a half-dozen men issued from the ship, clad in grotesque lightweight armor, flexible but airtight. Quade and Tommy Strike led the

group.

"We can't take the ship," the movie man pondered. "The repairs aren't finished, and it's too bulky to maneuver easily. I want no chances of a crack-up till the final take-off. We'll have to depend on our legs. The portocars are no good on this gravel."

"Which way?" Strike asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Can't see much from here." Quade took a periscope from his kit, stretched it out, and peered through the eyepiece. "No soap. There's a high dune. Let's go up there."

They did. But nothing was visible.

"Let me—" Strike began. He paused. His jaw dropped. He glared down into the valley they had just left. "Gerry."

The others followed the direction of his shaky, pointing finger. Gerry Carlyle was down there, her red hair disheveled within the transparent helmet. Clad in bulky space armor, she came running in panic up the slope.

But she wasn't getting anywhere!

Her legs pumped up and down. Her body was bent forward at a sharp angle. Racing as hard as she could, it was all she could do to stay in one place.

Then she vanished.

Strike and Quade looked at each other, gasped, stared back to the valley. Bleak, desolate, and empty, it lay washed in the white glare of the surging skies.

"It was Gerry, wasn't it?" Tommy gulped.

"Like Alice," Quade replied, completely flabbergasted. "She had to run faster and faster to keep in one spot... What sort of place is this, anyway?"

"Think it could have been a mirage?" Strike asked hopefully.

Quade led the way down the slope. He pointed to unmistakable footprints, dents in the gravelly ground.

"Mirages don't do that. It was solid. Gerry Carlyle was there, and she vanished."

Without warning, the tower materialized. Fifty feet away it sprang into sudden existence. A high, huge monolith of black, stone or metal, it was featureless, save for a gaping door and a gleaming bright sphere at the summit. As unexpectedly as it had

come, it disappeared.

"Phantoms," Quade said helplessly. "But three-dimensional, solid, real. Radio transmission of matter?"

"That tower!" Strike said. "We saw something like it from the air."

"It was back in that direction, Chief," one of the men broke in. "Not too far to walk."

"Okay," Quade replied. "Hop to it. Remember, we're in a cyanogen atmosphere. Helmets on at all times. Keep your guns ready." He called the ship and told Morgan his plans. "Take charge till we get back. If we don't make it before the deadline, take off without us."

None of the other men made any objection to this. Grimly they shouldered their packs and followed Quade and Strike down the valley.

It promised to be a dull journey. But that was only at first. Strike was the one who first caught sight of the blue sphere.

It rested on top of a dune, motionless, resembling some strange form of plant life. Warily they approached it. It was a ten-foot globe of translucent membrane, with a black nucleus inside that floated in some liquid.

"Think it's alive?" Strike asked.

"If it is, it breathes cyanogen. If it breathes."

Quade reached out to touch the thing – and it vanished.

It stayed vanished. Five minutes later the men gave up and continued their journey. Soon after this they encountered another sphere, similar to the first, but reddish instead of blue.

Quade approached within a few feet. Cautiously, trying not to make any sudden motion, he turned on his audiophone broadcaster. He made conciliatory noises. The globe shivered, and a picture formed on its surface.

It was a duplicate of Quade.

"It's a mirror," Strike said softly.

"No. Look at that."

The image of Quade was moving. It extended its arms and bowed, though the original made no motion. It jumped up and down, and then vanished as the

membrane went blank. The picture had been perfectly distinct, three-dimensional.

Another picture formed. This time it showed the space ship.

It also vanished. The sphere increased in size like an inflated balloon, and the men sprang back in alarm. But no hostile move was made. Instead, the thing disappeared.

In its place stood a model of the space ship. It was no more than six feet high, but complete in each detail.

This vanished, also. The original sphere, or a duplicate of it, reappeared. It shrank to a few inches and was gone.

"I will be damned," Quade said, slowly and emphatically. "It can't be happening. The thing's a super motion-picture projector."

"Intelligent?" Strike asked.

"Dunno. That membrane – I've a hunch it's composed of evolved, highly adaptable cells, which take the place of our own normal senses. Respiration, vision, and so forth may be accomplished by those cells. Communication – they seem to do it visually, by projecting pictures of thought-images on their membranous surface."

"But how can they vanish like that? And assume different shapes? That thing took the form of our space ship. Maybe of Gerry, too."

Quade made a despairing gesture. "Too deep for me, Strike. I think the key's in that black tower we saw. Let's get going."

An eternity of plodding, laborious marching ensued. Overhead white fires of the comet blazed, twisting in strange, titanic tides. The terrain underfoot was monotonous beyond description. Inside the suits, the men perspired and swore under their breath.

A creature like prehistoric Tyrannosaurus Rex leaped from nowhere. It stood kangaroo-like on its hind legs atop a dune, and stared around, its reptilian, flat head revolving slowly. It was at least twenty-five feet high. But that wasn't the most amazing part of the apparition.

Strike seized Quade's arm.

"That's a Venusian whip," he yelled. "A Venusian monster! Here – on the comet."

"You're crazy," Quade said.

Then he saw it. His eyes bulged. "It – it can't be real," Strike said desperately. "It can't be."

The whip settled the problem by sighting the men. Flicking out its long, prehensile tongue, it charged down the slope. The thunder of its progress shook the ground. It was certainly no phantom. Strike jerked his rifle to his shoulder and fired. The giant reptile flung back its head, hissed with ear – shattering shrillness. But still it continued its onrush.

The men were well-trained enough not to give way to panic. They scattered, each unlimbering his weapon. They evaded the monster's charge, but the prehensile tongue flicked out like greased lightning and rasped over Quade's suit as he sprang away. The guns bellowed out with staccato roars.

The whip, its head blown completely off, ran around in a vast circle. It took a long while before the minor brain in the tail-end of its spine brought it the realization that it was dead. Then, abruptly, it toppled over. The great tail continued swishing, the muscles twitched under the scaly hide.

"Phantom?" Quade said bitterly. "I don't think so. It isn't vanishing, is it?"

"I don't get it," Strike mused. "A Venusian life-form on the comet. Somebody else might have forestalled us. But why bring a whip here?"

There seemed to be no solution to the problem. Nor was it possible to examine the giant carcass closely. Muscular reaction still made it a bundle of potential dynamite, twitching and jerking as it did at unexpected intervals. So the men resumed their march.

They were unquestionably nervous, and Quade could not blame them. He himself jumped slightly when Strike cried out: "Say, I just thought of something. How can an oxygen-breathing whip live in a cyanogen atmosphere?"

There was no possible answer to that, of course.

The next arrival was the red sphere, or a duplicate of it. It appeared on the summit of a dune, rolled down toward the Earthmen, and suddenly hesitated. From empty air around it appeared a dozen bluish globes, converging on the original one. They formed a milling, chaotic group of bubbles. When they drew away, the red one was gone. A deflated, punctured skin lay on the gravel, and colorless ichor was running out of it.

A score of reddish globes materialized from the air. The blue ones began to roll rapidly away, the newcomers in furious pursuit. Both groups scooted over a rise and disappeared, this time in a somewhat more logical manner.

"Didn't see us, I guess," Strike said.

"No... The blue ones seemed down on the red ones, and vice versa. Two different

tribes or species, perhaps. But the color seems to be the only difference."

"I wonder if they're intelligent," Strike persisted.

"It's difficult to say," Quade replied thoughtfully as he trudged on, plowing through the gravel. "It doesn't seem so, but their thought-processes may be so entirely alien to ours that there's probably no common ground to meet on. There are vast gaps even between the System's planetary life-forms.

"Originally the Arbermius spores, drifting through the void, may have created life. But adaptation and environment played a tremendous part. Besides, I doubt if any sort of spore could get through this comet's coma. Microscopic bodies, shoved around by radiation, would be repelled by the electronic barrier. I told you we might run into almost anything here. We're outside normal boundaries – almost outside our known Universe."

"Are you telling me?" Strike replied bitterly. "Look! I might swallow a whip, but – this is too much."

Quade didn't believe what he saw. The other men were stupefied with amazement. They had topped a dune. In the valley beneath them squatted a vast bulk. It was alive, but it wasn't homogeneous. It was a freak, a sport, and an impossible one.

It had the body of an elephant, gaudily striped with a zebra's markings. It had the neck of an ostrich, unduly elongated. Its thin, awkward legs resembled those of a giraffe. And atop that lean, gawky neck was – the head of Tommy Strike.

It was quite unmistakable, to the last freckle and lock of disordered hair falling over the tanned forehead. It looked into space with a wildly vacuous air, turned toward the Earthmen. The colossal hulk writhed, struggled. For a second it stood erect. Then the frail legs splintered, and the torso came crashing down. It struggled in agony.

Incontinently, it vanished.

"All right," Quade said to the befuddled Strike. "That settles it. The whip was a known life-form. This wasn't."

"The component parts were."

Quade refrained from the obvious rebuttal. "Yes. But nothing like that, in toto, ever existed in any universe. It was created, somehow, and it disappeared into thin air. The question is how?"

"Dunno. I think the question's why?"

Quade resumed his forward march.

"The answer to both is in the black tower, I'm certain. It shouldn't be far away now."

They saw it long before they reached it, a colossal structure rearing from the gravelly surface of the comet. It seemed entirely deserted. It was a duplicate of the phantom monolith that had appeared some time before. The same gateway yawned uninvitingly. The same shimmering, metallic sphere crowned the summit, crawling with unknown but potent force.

"Those red and blue globes never built that," Strike said emphatically. "It was built by hands, or their equivalent."

"Maybe the ancestors of our little friends did it," Quade said. "That tower may have stood there for a long, long time. Besides, it might have been built by machinery."

"Machines? Why should the globes use 'em? That outer membrane of theirs serves every purpose. They probably absorb food through it, if they don't acquire it in this screwy atmosphere by respiration."

"That could be, of course. Meanwhile, let's go down and investigate."

Furtively, they sneaked to the threshold of the tower and peered in. A huge bare chamber gaped before them. It was lit by dim, pale fluorescence, and seemed to stretch up and eternally. The interior of the tower was hollow. But far above Quade caught the gleam of metal.

"Machine up there—"

He was interrupted by a cry from Strike.

"Gerry!"

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

Strike raced toward her, the others not far behind. He knelt beside the woman, examining her oxygen apparatus. Quickly he turned a valve.

Gerry's face was flushed. Her lips were moving, and her eyes stared blankly, unseeingly. For a second, Strike imagined that the creatures of the comet had afflicted her with some weird disease. Then he recognized that this was merely delirium.

"Back to the ship," Quade commanded. "Two of you carry her."

"It's too late," Tommy Strike grunted. "Here come our little friends."

Dozens of the blue spheres were rolling across the threshold into the huge room. More and more of them flooded in. Inexorably they bore down on the trapped Earthmen.

Strike gently lowered Gerry to the floor and whipped out his gun. The others had already drawn. But none fired till the hostile intentions of the intruders became unmistakable.

Then Quade's explosive bullet blew one of the blue globes to fragments. A staccato blast of gunfire instantly boomed and echoed through the cyanogen atmosphere within the tower, when his men followed his lead. A dozen of the enemy vanished, collapsing like split bladders. Curiously enough, some of them continued their disappearance, dematerializing like ghosts. Others remained.

But more of them appeared. Quade and his companions were forced back against the inner wall. They had plenty of ammunition, but it was impossible to withstand the irresistible tide of the globes.

"Where in hell are they coming from?" Strike yelled.

On they came, more and more of them, till the floor of the tower was covered with bluish balls, ranging in size from two to ten feet.

Quade switched on his audiophone and called Morgan, at the ship.

"What's up, Chief?" Morgan asked, hearing the commotion.

"Come after us, quick," the cameraman said quietly. In a few succinct sentences, he explained the situation, pausing at times to take pot-shots at the monsters.

"Can't do it," Morgan said. "One of the engines just went out. It'll take hours to fix. We'll come and get you on foot."

"No," Quade snapped. "Stay in the ship. Get that engine fixed. Those are definite orders."

He had no time to say any more. Some of his men were already down, and the globes were rolling over them. Strike stood straddle-legged above Gerry's unmoving form, a gun in either hand. The remnant of the men were clustered together. Backed helplessly against the wall, they were surrounded by the advancing hordes. Abruptly, unexpectedly, there came a breathing space.

The reason for it could not be discovered at first. Quade only realized that the attackers were failing to press their advantage. Previously, when one sphere had been destroyed, another sprang immediately into its place. But now the ranks were thinning, almost imperceptibly at first, but with steadily increasing speed. An alleyway opened toward the door, and Quade caught a glimpse of something entirely

unexpected.

Through the door poured an army of red globes.

Red spheres and blue met in furious battle. The chamber was a seething, raging mass of bubbles, curiously lovely, tumbling and darting viciously in all directions. In dead silence, without visible weapons, the opposing groups pitted their strength against each other. And blue and red globes were deflated one by one.

"You were right," Strike gasped, swaying on his feet. "Those two gangs are down on one another. Boy, is that lucky for us."

"Yeah. If they're not both down on us."

There was enough time to take inventory. None of the men had been injured, save for minor contusions. The strong, flexible helmets had withstood all blows.

"No weapons," Strike said. "They don't use any, apparently. But they're committing mayhem anyhow."

Quade lifted his gun and then lowered it without firing.

"No visible weapons, Strike," he amended. "Don't forget, these creatures are utterly alien to us. Their weapons may be purely mental. They might kill by sheer thought-force."

"Then why doesn't it work on us?"

"Were not of the same species. We're of entirely different chemical composition," Quade pointed out. "Say, this fight looks like it'll keep up forever. There're more spheres now than when they started. They keep coming out of empty air."

"I noticed that," Strike grunted. "Hadn't we better make a run for it?"

"I think so."

The movie man issued orders. In a compact body, bearing Gerry's body between them, the group moved forward, guns lifted. The spheres paid little attention until the Earthmen were almost at the door. Then the bizarre comet creatures realized that their prisoners were escaping. Blue monsters and red joined forces to attack Quade and his companions.

This time results were somewhat different. Under the onslaught, most of the men went down, fighting gamely but uselessly. Quade was knocked flat beside Gerry. He twisted his head, trying to rise, saw the woman's eyes open and the light of consciousness spring into them. She recognized Quade.

Her lips moved, but her dead audiophone failed to respond. Nevertheless the movie man managed to read some of the words.

"Out of here ... quick... Save the others later. Only chance..."

There was still a gun in Gerry's hand. It blasted. The woman began to roll over and over. After a brief hesitation, Quade followed.

It wasn't easy. The thought of deserting his men was far from pleasant. But he realized that Gerry was seemingly deserting Strike, and he knew that she would never have done that without good reason. Moreover, two might escape where seven couldn't. Most of the globes were occupied with Strike and the other men.

By luck, skill and murderous aim, Gerry and Quade managed to reach the outskirts of the struggle. There they rose. Gerry gripped Quade's mittened hand and both ran frantically up the slope toward the nearest ridge.

Some of the spheres pursued. The next ten minutes were a chaos of gunfire and collapsing red and blue globes.

CHAPTER VI

The Seven Sleepers

When no more of the things appeared, Gerry sank down in the gravel, dragging Quade beside her.

"My audiophone," her lips formed. "Can you fix it?"

Quade had an emergency repair kit with him. Hastily he repaired the device. It wasn't long before Gerry's voice came to him.

"Keep your eyes open," she said breathlessly. "I don't know how much time we have, but it won't be long. We've only got the Proteans to contend with for awhile, but pretty soon all hell's going to break loose."

"Proteans?"

"That's what I call them. You'll know why when I tell you what's happened. Meanwhile, have your gun ready."

Succinctly Gerry outlined what had happened to her up to the time of her capture.

She went on: "Those creatures are intelligent. They communicate by pictures – thought-images – projected on their outer membrane. They communicated with me, all right. I found out plenty. Quade, what I'm going to tell you is going to seem unbelievable. Do you know how many Proteans there are?"

"A few thousand?" Tony hazarded.

"Seven," Gerry said. "Seven Proteans, and that's all. Seven sleepers!"

Quade wrinkled his brow. "I don't—"

"They're a decadent race. Ages ago they had an entirely different form, I don't know just what. They've lived on this comet for unimaginable eons. They evolved along lines totally alien to ours, reached the summit of their culture, and began to slide back. This barren body won't support much life. In time, only seven Proteans were left. They were highly evolved intellectuals, chained to this barren world because they hadn't mastered space travel. Know what they did?"

A red sphere materialized twelve feet away. It rolled toward them, expanding as it moved. Quade blew it to fragments. The fragments dissolved into nothingness.

"They built the black tower," Gerry went on. "It's a machine, Quade, and what it does is something almost impossible. It materializes – dreams!"

The man didn't laugh. "On first thought, it's crazy," he said thoughtfully.

"I know. But it's a fact that all living tissue has a sort of electric halo, a field of energy. Isn't that so?"

"Yeah. Why back in the nineteen-thirties, two chaps named Nims and Lane made a gadget sensitive enough to detect that field and record its patterns. But what has that got to do with a dream?"

"Dreams take electric energy, the same as conscious thought," Gerry explained. "I figured it out, as well as I could, from what the Protean told me. Ever have a nightmare where you run and run but get nowhere? Ever wake up covered with perspiration, exhausted? That proves dreams take energy. Listen, if corporal life has a measurable electric field, it's only a step further to record the energy patterns of a dream."

For a few moments there was silence, while Quade digested the information.

"I'm getting the picture," Quade said. "I think I follow you. If the energy pattern is recorded, why not change these patterns back into the electric waves that produced them, thus recreating the living issue, or the dream, that created them? The human voice was recorded in visible patterns long before Edison. But Edison's phonograph retraced those visible patterns with a needle and made the sound come to life again."

"Sure," he continued. "Even now images can be recorded as sound tracks. They sound like squeals and grunts, but an experienced movie engineer can identify them. I've done it myself. It's not such a long step to playing them back as three-dimensional images."

"More than images," Gerry put in. "The tower does just that, without the intermediate step. Nothing is actually recorded. The towers just take the electric dream-pattern of the seven Proteans and recreate it, broadcast it, in the precise positions and motions that the dreamer wishes."

"You mean all those spheres were dreams?" Quade asked. "Dreams that had acquired the attributes of matter?"

"Yes. They were real. Or, maybe, one-tenth real. Real enough to fight and die and communicate with me."

"But why?" Quade asked. "Scientifically, it's possible, though screwy as hell. But logically, there's no reason for it."

"It's logical enough," the woman declared, shifting her position uneasily on the hard gravel. "I told you there were seven bored intellectuals left on this comet. Blue and red – four of one, three of another. They couldn't leave their world. They were faced with an unending monotony of existence. What would you have done?"

"Go crazy," Quade admitted frankly.

"There was another way out. They had to create some interest in life. And they did. A deadly sort of chess game, three on one side, four on the other. It's logical enough. Chess is an intellectual pastime, and this is super-scientific chess. Here's what the Proteans did.

"They made this tower to materialize their dreams. They changed their shape, though I'm not quite sure about that. And they materialized their thought-patterns in the form of duplicates of themselves. Half of their brains are asleep and dreaming, while the other half is conscious, directing operations. We ourselves use only half of our brains, you know."

Quade nodded curtly. "Right. But you actually mean there are only seven real Proteans on the comet?"

"That's all. All the others are dream-images, plenty real enough though, because they're given the energy and attributes of matter by the black tower. For centuries this murderous chess game has gone on. It might have gone on eternally, if we hadn't introduced a new factor into the game."

"Wait a minute," Quade interrupted. Swiftly he told the woman of the bizarre

creatures they had seen on the way to the tower – the Venusian whip, and the freak with Strike's head.

"Sure." Gerry smiled wryly. "I was delirious, feverish. And I was inside the tower. My proximity to the machine simply made my hallucinations materialize. And that's the crux of the matter. The Proteans realized that I was valuable to them."

When Gerry stated her value to the Dreamers, Quade fell silent. His tanned face was suddenly grim and worried as he realized the potential danger.

"Think of our memories," Gerry whispered in horror. "The monsters we've seen on all the planets, the weapons we've used. The Proteans intended to put me asleep, control my brain, and induce me to dream of things I'd experienced. A Venusian whip. What a weapon that would be in the hands of the blues against the reds. We're invaluable to them as fodder. Our brains are storehouses of dreams. And the Proteans can materialize dreams!"

"Lord, oh Lord," Quade groaned. "What a mess. This is just about the damndest thing I've ever run up against. How the devil can I photograph a dream? It just isn't real."

"It's real enough to be filmed," Gerry said. "And a Protean, a real Protean, not a dream – can be captured. But there's another handicap. These things are above the minimum level of intelligence. By Interplanetary Law, no intelligent being can be taken from its home world against its consent."

"Well, that can wait," Quade said. "The main problem is to save Strike and my men. Wonder if the ship's ready yet?"

He used the audiophone. Morgan responded worriedly. The engine wasn't repaired but work to repair the ship was proceeding rapidly.

"We can't stay here," Tony said. "And we can't go back to the tower. Let's head for the ship."

"We'd better hurry," Gerry observed. "Once Tommy and the others are put to sleep, their dreams will start to come true. And Tommy has a vivid imagination."

Quade arose painfully, assisted Gerry to her feet. The woman was still weak, but she pluckily shook off the man's arm and started plodding forward.

"Keep your gun handy," she advised.

The Proteans seemed to be lying low. But once the two caught sight of a whip lumbering over a rise to the left. It did not menace them, however, and soon went out of sight.

"The main problem," Gerry mused, "is to awaken the seven sleeping Proteans. It'll do no good to kill the others. New ones will materialize faster than we can shoot."

"Where are the real ones?" Quade asked.

Gerry laughed bitterly. "Oh, they're not tucked away in a private dormitory. That's where the fun comes in. They're mixed in with the others. They're only half asleep, you know. Half of their brain is still conscious. And it's utterly impossible to tell a real Protean from a fake one."

"Can't we simply keep shooting till we kill off all the real ones?"

"It'd be like cleaning up the Asteroid Belt with a bucket," Gerry said in a hopeless voice. "We've got to identify the real ones and – well, I don't want to kill them unless it's necessary. They'd be no good to either of us dead. If we can awaken them—"

"We can't wake 'em up without identifying them," Quade said. "And we can't identify 'em without waking them up. Lord."

"Well, you can be sure this isn't a real Protean," Gerry said, as a shaggy, apelike figure lumbered over the rise toward them. "It's a Hyclops! Where's your rifle?"

The Hyclops, native to Ganymede, stands more than twelve feet high, is terrifyingly covered with hair, and has four arms. Its three one-eyed heads bear murderous fangs that protrude from a slobbering, loose-lipped mouth. "Get the eyes," Gerry yelled, scurrying to one side. "We haven't any super-explosive bullets, but – aim at the eyes."

"You're telling me," Quade grunted, dashing in the other direction. He whirled, crouched on one knee, pumped bullets at the monster. The Hyclops charged on, foam frothing from its slavering mouth. The huge, shaggy arms clawed at the air.

One bullet found its mark. The right head lost its eye and lolled uselessly on the fatty neck. The creature let out a soundless bellow of agony and whirled toward Quade. If this was a dream, the man thought, it was certainly one hell of a nightmare!

Quade scampered away. He caught a flashing glimpse of the monster towering above him, huge as a colossus, the mighty arms clutching. Quade dived between the pillarlike legs, shuddering at what might happen if a taloned hand closed on his space suit. In that cyanogen atmosphere, he'd die almost before the Hyclops crushed him.

Gerry's bullet found the center head. The huge monster shrieked silently and jerked erect. The remaining head lifted. Gerry fired again.

The Hyclops collapsed. Like a bag of deflated skin, it slumped down and fell on Quade. The man had only time for one frantic thought of impending destruction before he was smashed flat. He tried to roll aside—

And the Hyclops vanished. It disappeared into thin air. It was gone like the figment of a dream that it was.

"This is doing me no good," Quade said, rising unsteadily to his feet. "Suppose I'd wanted that head – or those heads, I mean – for my mantelpiece."

Gerry laughed somewhat bitterly. "Imagine how a real big-game hunter feels. Come on. Let's hurry, before Tommy uses his imagination again."

A new phase entered the situation. Mirages seemed to dance indistinctly all about them. Vague, half-seen images flickered in the distance and were gone – flashing pictures of alien worlds Tommy Strike had once seen – bizarre monsters, strange faces, some that were recognizable.

On they went, under the strange white sky of the comet. The seething, colossal tides of flame roared and swept above them. It was weird beyond all imagination. The two might have imagined themselves the last humans in the Universe, tracking a barren waste beneath the cosmic fires of creation.

Once they saw, or thought they saw, Gerry herself running rapidly but getting nowhere. This, too, dissolved.

"If I meet myself," Gerry said unhappily, "I'll go crazy. How much farther is it?"

"Not far," Quade comforted. "What's this, now?"

Apparently Tommy Strike had once more had delirium tremens. At least, the monster approaching looked like nothing that ever existed anywhere. It was a sea-serpent, twenty feet long, writhing rapidly toward them with vast jaws agape. But luckily it disappeared before guns could be drawn.

Quade and Gerry reached the ship without further mishap. Morgan greeted them, helping them off with the bulky suits.

"That engine's still giving trouble," he observed. "We strained it badly, getting through the coma. And another motor's in need of overhauling."

"Has to be done," Quade said grimly. "We want to get off the comet alive. I need a drink."

He took Gerry to the control cabin. For some time they pondered, between pouring and drinking. But they did succeed in calming their battered minds to coherence.

"We can't move the ship," Quade said at length. "That's certain. Will any of those traps and snares of yours work on the Proteans?"

"You can't hypnotize a sleeping person," the woman said. "So the hypnotic lure wouldn't work. That's the toughest part of it. My traps are designed for living monsters, not dreams and dreamers. The heavy-range guns might work, but we can't drag them all the way to the tower. Also" – she glanced at a chronometer—"time's getting short. We're nearing the Sun. This comet is traveling plenty fast."

Quade lit a cigar of greenish, aromatic Lunar tobacco.

"Let's think. We've got to figure out a way of waking the seven sleepers so their phantom legions will vanish. Um-m. What is sleep, anyway?"

"There's more than one theory. The brain varies between the states of excitation and relaxation. The greater the excitation, the sooner comes relaxation, or sleep. The seven Proteans are half awake and half asleep. Super-development of the brain causes that."

Quade nodded. "If we could irritate them enough to cause wakening— Let's see. These creatures are highly evolved. Their outer membranes are composed of specialized cells. That means their nerve-endings must be extremely sensitive. And they live in a cyanogen atmosphere."

"Cyanogen," Gerry said, drawing a comb through tangled red hair. "If we could release a gas or a liquid chemical spray to change the cyanogen into something irritating, something that would wake up the sleepers—"

"We can't use the ship," Quade pointed out. "It would have to be portable. Um-m." He reached for a pad and pencil and made hasty notations.

"(CN)₂ Plus O₂ yields nitrogen and carbon dioxide," the formula read. He showed it to Gerry.

"The Proteans are used to a cyanogen atmosphere. The carbon dioxide would be poisonous or suffocating to them. Maybe. It'd destroy all life on the comet, except us."

Gerry started convulsively. She snatched up the pad and figured quickly.

"Hold on. I think I've got it. Ammonium oxalate. Yeah. Look at this."

She showed Quade her notation. It read: "(CN)₂ Plus H₂O yields ammonium oxalate."

"Water?" Quade asked.

"Cyanogen plus water in the form of a simple spray would form ammonium oxalate. That salt isn't cyanide and would be a tremendous irritant to creatures living in cyanogen and its compounds. And the effect would be local. That's the answer."

We've got it!"

Quade nodded slowly. "I think you're right. Sure! We'll use portable tanks and sprayers. I'll get Morgan."

He did so, and issued hasty instructions.

There was instant, orderly confusion. Portable tanks had to be filled. Hoses and spray-nozzles had to be prepared. But at last a skeleton crew of men was ready, Gerry and Quade at their head. A few were left to work on the engines, Morgan among them.

"We'll be back as soon as we can," Quade said. "In the meantime, my orders still stand. If we're not back before the deadline, take off without us."

Morgan shook his shaggy head.

"We're getting awful close to the Sun, Chief."

"I know," Quade shrugged. "I'm taking a few cameras with me, but I can't load up on bulky stuff. It'd slow us down too much. It looks like we'll get precious little for Von Zorn. And you won't get any monsters, either," he added to Gerry. She didn't say anything.

They set out at a furious, but more hopeful pace.

"We'll wear a trail to the tower pretty soon," Gerry said bitterly.

"Uh-huh. I wonder if that will work?" Quade pondered. "Plain water doesn't sound like much of a weapon."

Ten minutes later his words seemed justified. A creature like a gigantic spider, six feet high and a dozen in diameter, rushed down a slope toward them. Its mandibles clicked viciously.

"The tanks," Gerry cried shrilly. "Try the water."

"Use your guns," Quade's deeper voice drowned her out. "Fire, everybody."

Pistols crashed loudly. At once the great spider was killed. But its body still raced forward, bowling over one man before it collapsed. Though its eyes had been smashed and it was blind, the mandibles still snapped in insensate fury, until it vanished from sight.

"There was no time for anything but bullets then," Quade explained. "But it looks like your chance is right here. There comes a blue globe."

One of the blue Proteans, only five feet in diameter, was rolling unsuspectingly toward them. On its surface-membrane a picture appeared – a picture of the spider that had just been killed.

Nobody said anything. The Protean hesitated, grew larger, and began to roll purposefully toward the group.

"Now." Gerry said.

Quade pointed the nozzle of his tank-tube. He turned a valve. The nozzle hissed shrilly. They stared hopefully, expectantly.

CHAPTER VII

"Forget the Guns!"

It began to snow. Ammonium oxalate was precipitated out of the cyanogen atmosphere. It drifted down on the Protean, who did not seem discouraged in the least degree.

"Doesn't work," Quade groaned, and used his gun.

The blue monster deflated. But several more appeared. Again Quade tried the water-tank, with equal failure. Bullets finally slew the comet creatures.

"Well," Gerry said, as the last of them disappeared. "I don't know. Either I'm completely wrong, or else ammonium oxalate affects only real Proteans, not the dream-images. In that case we've got to find the real sleepers."

"All right," Quade acceded. "We'll keep on toward the tower. Wed better not use the tanks again till we're absolutely ready. The sleepers may not have been warned, so we don't want to show our hand too soon. If your idea's right, we'll be okay. If it's wrong, we're eclipsed."

Gerry said nothing, though she realized the truth of Quade's assertion. Doggedly the little group plodded on through the gray, gravelly soil. Several times they caught sight of additional Proteans. Once they viewed a Hyclops, in the distance, pursuing a group of fleeing red spheres.

"Looks like the blue Proteans have captured Tommy," Gerry remarked. "They're using his dream-visions in their crazy chess game. Wonder what happened to the

other men?"

Quade was wondering, too, and it wasn't a pleasant thought.

Gerry's thoughts were equally distressful. Tommy Strike was in serious trouble. She felt that her own rashness had been responsible for his present predicament. She kept seeing his face –

Abruptly, she muttered something suspiciously like an oath and took deadly aim at a Protean that had materialized nearby. It exploded into tatters. She felt slightly better.

Overhead the fires of the comet's coma seethed and churned. Beyond that white veil the Solar System moved in its accustomed orbits. Work was proceeding on the Ark. People were wandering through the London Zoo, gaping at Gerry's exhibits. Hollywood on the Moon was, as usual, buzzing with excitement. Everywhere television sets were discussing the comet, and the possible fate of the explorers who had vanished into its fires.

Not far away were all these friendly, familiar things – shut out by an impalpable wall of alien matter. Light-years away. Gerry, Quade, and the others were imprisoned on the comet, while the galactic wanderer rushed on toward the disastrous proximity of the Sun. And slowly, slowly, the time of grace shortened.

From the start, things had gone wrong. Perhaps, Gerry thought, it was her fault. But, then, nobody could have foreseen conditions on the comet. It was too far outside the ken of Earthmen. Gerry felt a touch of awe as she looked up at the weird sky, a realization of the vast, cosmic immensities that surround our Solar System. So much lay outside. So much was unknown, could never be understood by human minds!

She shrugged and plodded on. It didn't matter. The business of the day was something entirely different. This was more familiar, dealing with weapons, pitting the skill and intelligence of Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle against her enemies.

Quade's thoughts were rather similar. His keen brain was working, discarding possibilities, advancing theories, planning, plotting.

When they came in sight of the black tower, the minds of all the group were attuned to highest intensity.

Quade stopped.

"We don't know the full power or capabilities of the Proteans," he said quietly. "So watch yourselves. They may have purely mental weapons. Keep alert, and in touch with me. The minute anything seems to be going wrong, let me know."

They went down toward the monolith. It wasn't deserted now. Its base was hidden

by thousands of the spheres, red and blue, united against a common foe. The Proteans waited, silent, alert, menacing...

The tension increased almost to the breaking point. Step by step, crunching their heavy space boots through the gravel, the party advanced. The enemy made no move. Silently they waited at the base of the ebon monolith, under the white, churning skies of flame.

Silence... Ominous, torturing silence.

Quade's nerves were taut. He could feel the thrill of impending danger flooding through him, tugging at his mind, crying the nearness of peril. His hands swung loosely at his sides, never too far from the gun-butts. The rifle slung across his shoulder slapped his hips at each step. Gerry walked cautiously beside him. After them came the men, bizarre figures with the big watertank cylinders jutting above their helmeted heads.

The nearest of the spheres was forty feet away. Thirty. Twenty-five...

The slope was not so steep now. Crunch, crunch went the metal boots. Hoarse breathing whistled through the audiophones.

"Chief," somebody whispered.

"Steady," Quade said. "Steady, fellas!"

Twenty feet separated the group from the Proteans. Fifteen... Ten...

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

Hesitation would have been fatal. Gerry and Quade kept on, and a path was cleared for him as he moved. One by one, two by two, the Proteans shrank away.

In his track came Gerry and the others. The tension was unendurable.

"Chief," a voice said, "they're closing up behind us."

"Let 'em," Quade snapped, and kept going.

The wall of the tower loomed just ahead. Gerry and Quade stepped over the threshold, stood for a second in the queer pale illumination streaming from within. The floor was carpeted with Proteans, some tiny, others six feet and more in diameter. Gerry could not see Tommy Strike or the others.

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

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

At their feet lay five motionless figures, Earthmen all, unconscious and silent in their space suits and helmets. In a single glance, Gerry saw that they breathed. But the strange spell of dream held them fettered.

"Tommy!"

Gerry sprang forward, knelt beside Strike. She put her palms flat on the transparent helmet, as though she could feel through it the flushed face of the man.

As though, at a signal, the Proteans roused into activity. A stir of concerted movement rippled through the chamber. The spheres swayed, rocked. Suddenly they poured down on the Earthmen.

Quade's gun snarled without hesitation. The men fired a single, continuous roar of bullets.

But from the start it was hopeless. Like the fabled legions of Cadmus, the Proteans seemed to spring into existence from empty air. Strange dream-beings, given the attributes of matter and energy by the power of the black monolith. Dreams made real-living, dangerous, roused now to furious activity.

Quade saw two of his men go down under the onslaught. He blew a blue monster to fragments, shattered a red one. Then he also fell under the attack of a giant. It rolled completely over him and was gone. It had vanished.

White flakes drifted down against Quade's helmet.

He sprang up, somewhat dazed by his fall. He stared around.

The dream-legions had unaccountably thinned. At least half of them had vanished. But more were approaching, materializing from the air.

Standing above Strike's body, Gerry Carlyle was using her tank-and-hose. H₂O – plain, ordinary water – spurted high in the cyanogen atmosphere, and the precipitated ammonium oxalate fell like snowflakes.

"Use your tanks!" Gerry shrilled. "Forget the guns."

Quade set the example. He twisted a valve, sent a fine spray of water shooting up. Immediately the others did the same. The salt had no effect on most of the Proteans.

But suddenly, without warning, a number of them snuffed out and were gone. Then a few hundred more disappeared.

"They're waking up," Gerry cried. "The seven sleepers—"

Seven sleeping Proteans, securely hidden among their materialized dreams, each identical with the originals. Now awakening came to them, one by one. Sensitive nerve-endings reacted to the irritant salt. No real Protean could remain in dreaming sleep under the circumstances. And whenever a real Protean awoke, his dreams vanished.

The hordes thinned. They were reduced quickly by leaps and bounds. Five hundred – two hundred – a few dozen—

Finally, seven spheres, four blue and three red, lay within the tower. Quivering slightly, they shuddered under the attack of the irritant salt and began to roll toward the doorway.

Quade blocked their path, lifting his sprayer threateningly.

The Proteans hesitated, not knowing what to do.

"Turn off the water," Gerry commanded. "They won't go to sleep again. I'll try to communicate with them. I've learned how."

She turned the valve of her tank and advanced toward the nearest blue Protean. It waited helplessly. The five-foot sphere looked like nothing so much as a gigantic Christmas tree ornament, Quade thought absently.

Gerry wasn't saying anything, but the sphere was agitated. Pictures appeared on its surface membrane.

The woman turned to Quade.

"They're telepaths, you know. They can read strongly projected thoughts. And I can piece out what they mean, more or less, from the pictures they make."

There was another period of silence, while the strange, three-dimensional, color images flickered over the globe's bluish skin.

"It's all set," Gerry remarked at length. "Tommy and the others haven't been hurt. They'll wake up by themselves pretty soon. Feed 'em caffeine and brandy and they'll be ready to go."

"They're harmless now?" Quade said.

"Yes. As long as we don't squirt water on them, they'll play ball with us. The ammonium oxalate is complete torture to the Proteans."

The movie man was glancing at his chronometer. He audiophoned the ship, and

conversed briefly with Morgan. Then he turned back to Gerry.

"Yeah," he said bleakly. "It's nearly deadline. By putting all the men to work mury pronto we may get the engines repaired in time to pull free of the comet. But as for shooting any pictures, I can't spare a man. Well, I'll shoot what background I can on the way back to the ship."

Gerry was communicating again with the Proteans.

"The Sun's proximity won't hurt these beasties," she said. "Apparently they can resist electric energy much better than we can." Her voice turned wistful. "Maybe we could come back to the comet after it rounds the Sun."

"Nope." Quade shook his head hopelessly. "No ship. Your Ark won't be ready till too late, and there's no other vessel. After we get through the coma again and pull away from the Sun – if we do – this boat of ours will need complete overhauling. When we leave Almussen's Comet, it means good-bye."

He pondered.

"Unless we can take some of the Proteans with us," he added at length. "Find out, will you?"

The woman conversed silently. Then she shook her head.

"They won't leave home. Although, I'll tell you what. Go back and get to work on the ship. Take Tommy and the others with you. Pick me up here when you take off, and I may be able to convince some of the Proteans in the meantime."

"Better get more than one," Quade said, "or you'll lose out."

The woman's eyes narrowed.

"I'll attend to that," she observed. "Scram."

But Quade still hesitated to leave.

"Sure you'll be safe?"

Gerry patted her water tank

"Plenty safe. My audiophone's working, anyway. But I guess you'd better leave Tommy Strike here with me."

Bearing their unconscious burdens, Quade and his men set out on the return journey. Luckily the gravity of the comet was so small that they were able to negotiate the trip without too much delay.

Once aboard the ship, every man pitched in and sweated and toiled over the motors. Even those who had been put to sleep were revived without trouble, and they also contributed their efforts. Yet Quade watched his chronometer worriedly.

It seemed hours before the final tests were completed. The reliability of the ship was still uncertain, but there was no time to waste. The deadline was already past.

Quade worked hurriedly at the controls. The craft lifted waveringly, and slid along thirty feet above the uneven surface.

Soon they sighted the tower. Quade landed beside it. From the monolith emerged Gerry, Strike, and two blue Proteans. The woman called Quade on the audiophone.

"Two of them will go with us. One for you, one for me. Let me in the ship, will you?"

"Swell," Quade replied, pressing a lever that opened the airlock nearest Gerry. "Hop aboard."

She and Strike complied. In the ship, they removed their helmets and rushed to the control room.

"Open the lock again," Gerry gasped. "Get cyanogen into it. The Proteans can't live in oxygen, so we'll have to keep 'em in the lock till we can fix up an air-tight room for them."

"Check."

Quade opened the lock, and the two Proteans hastily rolled into it. The valve shut after them.

Gerry had already scurried off to prepare a home for her cometary guests. Strike remained with Quade, mopping his brow.

"What an experience. Worse than going under ether, Tony. I've got the worst headache."

He fumbled in a closet for a pain-killer.

"You'll have a worse headache if luck isn't with us," Quade said grimly. "The deadline's past, Strike. I'm going to take the biggest chance I've ever taken in my life."

The other man turned.

"Eh?" he asked bewilderedly

Quade sent the ship arrowing up.

"We're a lot nearer the Sun than we should be. But this boat's too strained to stand up long in the electronic bombardment of the coma. We can't stay in it as long as we did before. Our only chance is to accelerate like hell and go straight through the thinnest part."

Strike's jaw dropped considerably.

"The thinnest part. You mean—"

"Yeah. The tail of a comet always points away from the Sun. The Sun's energy pushes at the comet's coma and tail. That means the thinnest section of the coma is directly opposite the tail on the side facing the Sun."

"Jumping Jupiter," said Tommy Strike weakly. "We break through at top speed, headed for the Sun. And we're inside Mercury's orbit?"

"Way inside. Tell your side-kick to get the Proteans out of the lock in a hurry or they'll be fried alive. Unless they can resist plenty of energy."

Strike departed in a frantic rush.

Quade crouched over the controls, his lean face grim and expressionless, a cold fire in his eyes. He was taking a long chance. But it was the only one. To remain on the comet an hour or two longer would mean certain destruction.

He jammed on more acceleration. The ship streaked up like a thunderbolt, heading for the turgidly flaming skies. Faster – faster –

He called Morgan, spoke briefly over his shoulder.

"Strap me in. Bandage me. I'm accelerating plenty."

The other man obeyed.

Quade, looking more like a mummy than a human being, snapped another order.

"Take care of the men. Ready them for acceleration."

Morgan nodded silently and went out.

Already the space devils were tearing at the ship. The struts groaned and shrilled under the terrific strain. But this was only the beginning, Quade knew. The real test would come later.

White fires loomed ahead. The coma! Quade jammed on more power, felt sickness tug at his stomach, felt his eyes press out of shape as the muscles strained to focus the delicate mechanism of vision.

And now they were in the coma.

Faster, faster! Added to the tremendous speed was the electronic bombardment that ripped at the fabric of the already weakened vessel. Once more the metal of the ship began to glow faintly. Again the craft yelled in shrill metallic protest.

The visiplat was a hell of raving white fire. It cleared without warning. In place of the curdled flames was a round, blazing disk. The Sun—

And the space ship was driving toward it at top acceleration.

Quade took a deep breath. Closing his eyes, he touched three buttons in rapid succession. Immediately he was flung sideward, as though by a giant's hand. Glass shattered throughout the ship. Light metal bent like putty. Men screamed in agony as ribs and small bones cracked. Everyone was strapped into safety compartments, well padded, but those puny devices were far from enough.

The ship curved. At top speed it swerved away from the Sun. Quade had not dared decelerate, for the mighty mass of the Sun could overcome any number of gravity-screens at this small distance. The outer hull glowed flaming red. The straining motors hummed, rattled, hissed under the overload.

A pointer on a gauge before Quade hovered on a red line, went past it, hesitated, and crept slowly back. He breathed again. Gasping, he began to decelerate.

It was over. They were safe. They had fought against comet and Sun.

And they had won the fight!

CHAPTER VIII

Double Double-Cross

Exactly one month later, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike were sitting in the woman's private office in the London Zoo, sipping cocktails and reading rave press notices.

"What a draw," Strike chortled. "Our blue Protean is drawing customers like

flypaper."

"Uh-huh," the woman said happily. "And that isn't the best of it, either, I'm just waiting for a television call."

Strike put down a clipping.

"You've been gloating over this secret of yours for a month. What the devil is it?"

Gerry's answer was cut short as the television buzzed. She sprang up and answered it. On the screen appeared the simian, contorted face of Von Zorn.

"You chiseler," he yelped. "You double-crossing so-and-so. I'll sue you from here to Pluto."

Tommy Strike got in front of the screen.

"Listen, drizzlepuss, you're talking to a lady."

Von Zorn turned a brilliant green. "Ha, a lady! Would a lady palm off a dream on me? A Protean? What a laugh. For a month it acted all right. And now, right when I was making a speech at the Rotary Club with the thing on the table beside me – it vanishes. Just like that!"

Strike turned to see that Gerry was helpless with laughter. Feebly she reached up and turned off the television.

"You palmed off one of the fake Proteans on Von Zorn," Tommy accused.

"I told you they couldn't play me for a sucker," Gerry gasped, and exploded into a fresh outburst of merriment. "It's turn and turn about. They tricked me into giving 'em publicity. So I just turned the tables."

The television buzzed again. This time Strike turned it on. But it wasn't Von Zorn. It was, instead, Tony Quade, and he was looking surprisingly happy.

"Hello," he greeted cordially, removing a battered pipe from his firm mouth. "Everybody cheerful, I see. That's nice."

Gerry sobered suddenly. "Well?"

"Oh, nothing much. Von Zorn told you our little pet vanished, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"I just wanted to get it straight. You arranged with one of the Proteans to create a dream-duplicate, and for me to get the duplicate. And you fixed it up so my

Proteans would disappear after a time. That right?"

"That," said Gerry, "is right. And I'm not apologizing."

"Oh, don't apologize," Quade said urbanely. "Everything's just fine. I wanted to show you this."

He lifted a three-sheet placard which read:

NINE PLANETS PRESENTS

CALL OF THE COMET

Produced and Directed by

Anthony Quade

Starring

The Proteans

and

Gerry Carlyle

The woman gasped inarticulately. "It's a fake," she cried at last. "You only shot a few backgrounds on the comet."

"Yeah," Quade acknowledged. "But I managed to get acquainted with my dream Protean. He was as intelligent as his original, you know. He told me he was a fake, that he'd vanish after awhile. So I knew what to expect, and I took precautions."

"It's still a fake," Gerry said stubbornly.

"Think so? Remember how the Proteans communicate? By projecting colored, three-dimensional images on their skins. Those pictures can be photographed, Miss Carlyle.

"I got my Protean to think and project a complete photoplay – starring you – and we shot and transcribed it directly from Protean's membranous skin. I photographed a photoplay. I told you the creatures were intelligent.

"It's a perfect reproduction," Quade went on. "Nobody could tell it from the real thing. I've got the history of the Proteans, our arrival, your capture – everything that happened."

"It's illegal to pretend I'm in the picture," Gerry snapped furiously. "I know that, at any rate."

"You signed a contract in Von Zorn's office," Quade pointed out. "We've a perfect right to bill you as star of this picture." He grinned. "It'll be swell publicity for you, lady. And you don't deserve it."

Gerry breathed deeply. But the training of years stood her in good stead.

"At least, I've got the only Protean in existence in this System," she merely remarked. "That's something you can't swipe."

Quade chuckled maliciously.

"Yeah? How do you tell a real Protean from a dream one? The dream one vanishes. Yours hasn't vanished yet, has he?"

Gerry struck angrily at the televisor, shutting it off. She barked into an audiophone: "Peters! Peters! Is my Protean still there?"

"Sure," came an unseen voice. "Why shouldn't he be? He's rolling around in his tank of cyanogen, happy as a lark."

"Don't worry," Strike said, putting a capable arm around Gerry. "He's real enough."

The woman emitted a small groan.

"But is he? There's only one way of telling. If he vanishes, he's a fake."

"Well," said Tommy Strike, after thoroughly kissing his fiancée, "at least there's no danger of my vanishing. After all, what's a Protean or two?"

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

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

Strike released the woman and headed for the door.

"See you later, honey," he said over his shoulder. "I'm off to Mars. I hear the mariloca are running . . ."

For some reason, "Catch-'em-Alive" Gerry Carlyle scampered frantically after him.

BONUS BARNES STORY

THE LITTLE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

GET the picture, folks.

I was just home from a tough week-end with the ponies at Caliente, with a flock of worthless pari-mutuel stubs and a Chinese lottery ticket. The effect of a pint of high-class brandy was beginning to wear off, and I was just beginning to feel sorry for myself in a big way.

Right then there was a high-pitched whoosh somewhere in the sky over the house, a lot of popping and roaring, and a terrific thump in the backyard. I could feel a blast of heat clear in the front room.

So I ran out, and there was this – this thing smack in the middle of my petunia bed. The petunias were burned to a crisp, and so was I! At first I thought the Nazis had come, and this was a time bomb or a dud shell. But then I saw it wasn't either of those. It was reddish-colored, and shaped like an egg.

But what an egg. It was about four feet high and nearly five feet from end to end. And what made me sure it wasn't a bomb was the fact that there were windows in it. Also, a door.

The whole thing was so hot I couldn't approach it at first, but pretty soon it cooled off. Then the door opened, and a little green man came out. All right, all right; never mind the cracks. It *was* a little man, all dressed in green. He was about two feet tall.

I shut my eyes and shook my head vigorously, which I've found to be excellent treatment for little men who come out of bottles. But he didn't go away. Just stood there looking up at me. Pretty soon six more little men came out. Aha, I figured, it's the seven dwarfs. But where's Snow White?

Pretty soon a whole lot of jumbled thoughts just popped into my head from nowhere, as if somebody was talking inside my brain. I began to have doubts about whether that brandy had been so high class after all. I looked around, hoping someone would come along and tell me I wasn't having the deetees. But no soap.

I live in one of them broken-down southern California subdivisions that petered out

before it really got started. My cottage is alone at the end of a beautifully paved street, with lightless lamp posts, and grass pushing through the cracked sidewalk. There was nobody inside a city block to see what was going on.

All of a sudden I caught on. The little guy was talking, in a queer, piping gabble. The syllables didn't sound like anything I ever heard, but somehow I understood every word. Sure; it was mental telepathy.

He told me a weird story about how the egg-shaped thing was a space ship, and how they'd come from billions of miles away through interstellar space. He pointed out a star in the southeast and said that was his home. Then he said they were getting low on fuel, and chose to land on Earth because its physical conditions were pretty much like those on their home planet. They were friendly, and didn't want to stay much longer than it would take to replenish their fuel supply, and would I please happen to have some of the stuff, which was very rare where they come from, on hand?

I was dumfounded, naturally. But being very intelligent, I soon grasped the situation. Science, see? Superscience of a great civilization of little green folk, conquering space. I catch on quick because I have always believed in science. I read about it sometimes. It's the nuts.

And believe it or not, all they needed was a little copper. I searched my small change and found two pennies. The green men gathered around, and promptly went wild with excitement. Thoughts of gratitude crowded my mind till I was dizzy.

Then I remembered something. A few months back I'd had one of those penny boards to fill out with samples of Lincoln head cents, one of each year's mint. I hadn't been able to find all the required ones and had dropped the whole thing. But I had a lot of copper pennies left.

I ran in and collected about three dozen and offered them to the space travelers. They were overwhelmed, bowing and grinning and patting me on the leg affectionately. They lugged my pennies into the space ship, and then popped, out again to form a solemn semi-circle around me. The leader raised his hand and began to spiel a lot of nice things. The main idea seemed to be that they were grateful no end, and wanted to do something for me. Just about anything within their power to bestow – and that took in plenty of territory.

I thought: it's just like the old fairy tale where the guy helps the little wood sprite and gets three wishes in return. Except that I only got one. So it had better be good.

I pondered, and a lot of wild nonsense went through my head. Finally I realized that here was the chance of a lifetime to be a big shot, or pile up a quick fortune and live the life of Riley happily ever after. So I suggested, "Could you give me the secret of how to make gold?"

No soap. They didn't know what gold was. So sorry.

"Well, then, how about some scientific jigger to make me invulnerable to all weapons?"

The leader of the little men looked me over and went into a huddle with his mob. The verdict again was no dice. They figured this was too great a power to hand out to any one person, especially to one whose character might not be the most noble. Nothing nasty about this remark, just a statement of fact.

The same remark was my answer to a delicate hint about a super weapon that might make me, quite by coincidence of course, all-powerful.

It began to look as though I wouldn't make any fortune after all. Then I thought of a slick one.

"Say, d'you happen to know how to make yourself invisible? That'd be an interesting power to have. For entertainment purposes, and stuff like that there." I looked innocent, so as not to let the little wise guy know what I was thinking.

He looked at me again as if he knew darn well what I had in mind, and then smiled a bit. One of the others went into the space ship and brought out a funny looking gadget. There was a circle of metal, just big enough to fit around the head of a green man. This, was braced inside with a crisscross of thin bars. And rising from this, on a short stem, was a squat cone.

"This," came the little man's thoughts, "is an apparatus to induce invisibility of its wearer. This ring is placed upon the head – normally it fits our heads but has been crudely adjusted to fit yours – and this tiny switch at the base of the cone is pressed." Fortunately, I am not very big – in fact, as James Littleman, I am well named although somewhat on the stocky side. "A ray-screen is produced shooting down from the cone, completely enveloping the wearer, which bends light rays around him. For a period of four hours, no more and no less, he is invisible; then the power is exhausted."

The green man handed up a pair of small spectacles, the bows of which had been extended and bent so I could wear 'em. More thoughts came.

"These will permit the invisible one to see electronically, despite the fact that no true light rays penetrate the ray-screen. And mark well this warning, sir. The invisibility rays must never be allowed to touch the head, else the delicate neurons of the brain will be irremediably damaged, resulting in madness or death. Other parts of the body can withstand this force for very limited periods, but not the brain. This means that once this apparatus is adjusted and operating, it cannot be removed until the power has exhausted itself. Once invisible, the wearer must remain invisible for his allotted four hours."

I rubbed my hands in glee and told the little men I savvied everything. There were more demonstrations of affection and gratitude, worse than a reunion of tipsy fraternity brothers at homecoming day, and then they all piled into their space ship. I backed off. There was a terrific *swish*, a roaring, and there were my petunias, completely wrecked. But no space ship.

I grinned, hugging the invisibility device. For forty cents I had invested in something that would make me a fortune well inside of four hours. All over town there were places where money lies around loose, just waiting for me to come in and pick it up. They call 'em banks.

I always did say science is the nuts.

Next ayem I had my plans laid out. I drove downtown by ten o'clock, parked in a lot, and ducked, into the rest room in the subway. There, where nobody could see, I fixed the invisibility unit on my dome, put on the goggles, and snapped the switch. Right away everything around me got dim and reddish.

I could see pretty well, though, except when I looked down and tried to see myself inside the cone of rays. That tilted the outfit on my head and made my feet and legs visible. Just for a second they felt cold and numb, as if ready to drop off from frostbite. So I, didn't try that again.

Instead, I piled out of the subway building and headed for the Third National Bank. Once a woman shopper barged out of a store and ran into me before I could dodge. She went down in a spray of bundles, staring wildly around.

"Lady," I said with my customary patience, "whyn't you look where you're going?"

Courteously I picked up one of her fallen packages. She stared at the thing as if it would bite her, her eyes rolled up at sound of my disembodied voice, and pretty soon she passed out. I got away from there fast.

In the Third National the set-up was perfect. It was Monday, and lots of depositors were checking in their long green. I waited till one of the tellers left his cage. Then I just walked in and gathered up about six hundred bucks and stowed it away in my pocket. It was that easy. I shrank aside as the teller came hurrying back and carefully picked my way toward the front door.

Just then the teller let out a terrific squawk.

"Robbery!" he yelped. "Bank robbers."

Alarm bells began to hammer; people ran about aimlessly. The big doors automatically slammed tight and locked. Police appeared magically waving their guns. And there I was, dodging and dancing about like a lightweight contender, trying to keep out of everybody's way, stuck with that six centuries and no way to

get out.

At first it was a laugh. A sergeant began snapping questions at the scared teller.

"How long was you out of your cage?" he barked.

"Not more than thirty seconds."

"You sure the dough was there when you stepped out?"

"P-positive."

The officer barked at the bank guard, an old gink who hangs around the door doing nothing much in particular.

"D'you remember if anybody went out in the last few minutes, before the teller yelled?"

The guard was positive. Four people had come in, but no one had left the bank for at least five minutes before the uproar.

"That means," thundered the sergeant, "the robber is still in this here bank." Very portentous. Drawing his gun ominously. That kind of stuff. "Line up, everybody. Against the wall!"

I had to snicker. It sounded like a raspberry. The copper looked straight through me and growled, "Who said that?"

The search began, in spite of a lot of beefing from the customers. Naturally it was a flop. But what caught me with my – well, unawares – was that the people, after being searched, weren't allowed to go. Those bank doors stayed shut, and were going to stay shut, evidently, till the money turned up. Then it dawned on me that I was in trouble. If this business went on four hours, then I would be visible. Also sunk. I began to sweat. Besides, I had other plans of what to do with them four hours.

Finally I had to admit it. My first skirmish was a defeat. Or, rather, I would have to make a strategic withdrawal. In order to get away I had to give up the six hundred. Of course a man of my intelligence is never at a loss in an emergency. So I went over to the manager's desk – he was a sour-puss I had never liked, which was why I knocked off his bank in the first place – and tossed the sheaf of bills right into his lap.

"My Gawd," he yammered, eyes popping and gazing around in all directions. "Here's the money!"

The sergeant strode over.

"Where'd you find it?"

Right there the manager made his mistake. He told the truth.

"It just dropped from nowhere into my lap. It materialized out of the air."

The copper narrowed his eyes. "Wise guy, huh? Now quit kiddin' an' let's have the facts."

"I'm telling you, Officer, it just appeared out of nothing. One minute I was sitting here worrying about it, and the next minute it flew into my lap."

"Well, I wouldn't quit worryin' if I was you. You're gonna have plenty to worry about if you stick to that story."

The argument went on merrily, with the sweating manager getting in deeper and deeper every time he opened his mouth. I enjoyed it so much I forgot what I was doing, and it was after eleven when I realized that time was slipping by.

So I slipped in between two of the fidgeting customers and said, "Well, they've found the money. It's about time they let us out of here, don't you think?"

The two men turned to one another and said "You're darn right!" simultaneously, and looked kind of foolishly at each other. But the idea stayed with 'em, and they began to put up a big fuss. Before very long the doors were opened, and I slipped outside.

My plans were all in a mess, of course; bank robbery, after my harrowing experience, was out, but definitely. From now on I was allergic to banks. I cudgeled my brains for a means of using my temporary invisibility to pile up some quick money, I had thought the bank idea so foolproof that I hadn't bothered to dope out any alternative plans.

The more I cudgeled, the less I could think of. Offhand I couldn't bring to mind a single place where there'd likely be any quantity of money on hand easily available. If you think it'd be so easy, try it yourself. Stores? Penny-ante stuff. Besides, it's quite a trick, even if a guy is invisible, to open a cash register and lift the money right under the vigilant nose of the clerk. Jewelry shop? No, again. Their displays are all paste gems; the real stuff is in a vault.

Besides, I'd still have the difficulty of finding a fence to market the stuff. This would be true of any business which has window displays; the best goods aren't stuck in the windows.

Race-track? Yes, there's plenty of loose dough in the betting booths, but by the time the track opened, it would be too late in the afternoon. I would be visible again.

But the race-track idea brought me true inspiration. Bookies! They were illegal anyway. It would be a sort of public service to put one of 'em, out of business, if you look at it the right way. And I knew one, "Odds-On" Ottomeyer, so called because he was the tightest odds chiseler in town. Many's the time he had wrecked a sure thing for me by offering odds that turned out even worse than track prices.

I found Ottomeyer in the Elite Pool Hall, where he does his business in the back room with the connivance of the slightly enriched cop on the beat. Odds-On was all alone in the joint, practicing on a snooker table in the rear. I walked up to him and stopped. He turned at the sound of footsteps and goggled, when he didn't see anybody.

He turned back to play the pink ball in the corner pocket. I leaned up close so, as the pink ball rolled straight for its target, the pocket suddenly vanished from Ottomeyer's view. The ball also disappeared, as I caught it with an invisible hand and took it off the table entirely. Ottomeyer staggered around the table making funny noises, desperately fumbled with the strangely behaving corner pocket. No pink ball.

"Strike me dead," muttered the bookie hoarsely. "Strike me dead!"

That was my cue. In sepulchral tones I said: "So happy to oblige. You see before you the hand of retribution."

I stuck one hand out into the air before his nose, just for a second before it got too numbed.

That was plenty. Ottomeyer passed out in a dead faint without me laying a finger on him. Nobody was around to see how the middle of Ottomeyer's body became invisible as I straddled him. Inside the ray screen I couldn't see what I was doing, of course, but in his wallet I found two packages of crisp paper bound round once with another thin strip, the way all currency comes direct from the bank. They rustled comfortingly.

I judged there must be at least two or three grand. Leaving the 6-ball in Ottomeyer's coat pocket to give him something else to think about, I beat it back to the parking lot and climbed in my car. Science, I always say, is the nuts.

It was twelve-thirty by then. I had an hour and a half of invisibility left but, think as I might, I couldn't figure out anywhere I could pick up any more heavy sugar without risk. Especially as I was still allergic to banks after my experience at the Third National.

So I decided to call it a day and go on home. After all, I was sure I had a pretty fair return on my investment, and in spite of me being a pretty smart guy, there was no use pushing my luck. So I tooled my jalopy, sitting with my head tilted back a bit so as not to allow the ray screen to affect my feet or legs, toward the street.

Right there I ran into some unexpected trouble. The parking lot attendant happened to be standing near the driveway, talking to a woman, when I wheeled by. The two of 'em stared like hydrophobiacs at the apparently driverless car. The boy thought at first the car was just coasting down the gentle incline, having slipped a faulty brake.

He jumped on the running-board and opened the door to slide in. I gave him a shove. He sat down hard in the dirt. I tossed the parking ticket stub at him, accelerated sharply, and turned into Hill Street. A quick gander back showed me the dame had collapsed in a gibbering heap, while the attendant was gnawing one thumb and having a tough time keeping his eyeballs from dropping out.

I never saw traffic so crazy as it was that day. Horns blasted at me all through the business district, and cars swerved like jitterbugs getting out of my way. Dozens of near accidents littered the trail of my passing. It was when I was well into the residential section that the inevitable happened. There was a wail of a siren, and a radio patrol car pulled alongside.

"Pull over, you," came the familiar yell, bull-headed and arrogant.

Then I saw a policeman's face lean out the window, and the official jaw dropped six inches.

"My Gawd," he croaked. "They ain't nobody in it!"

Obediently, I drew up to the curb with the engine idling, cussing silently. Fate was sure making it tough for me to be a super-criminal. I couldn't outrun a radio car, and a sensation was the last thing I wanted to create at the moment. Instead, I decided to outwit the law with my superior intelligence. The two wondering officers stalked up to my car and flung open the door with a dramatic gesture. Two silly grins wavered uncertainly.

"It just ain't possible," one cop said. "Or maybe it's a ghost."

"I can see the captain's face when he reads our report on this," the second one said. "D'ya think maybe we oughta ignore the whole thing?"

"We can't. We got the call over the radio to investigate. I better drive it in to the station, I guess."

He started to climb in. The situation was desperate, when I got an inspiration. Making my voice metallic as possible, I chanted "Please do not touch anything in this automobile. It is an experimental machine, operated by remote radio control. Please do not touch anything in this automobile. It is an experimental machine, operated by remote radio control."

The two cops nodded together as though they were tied to the same string.

"Aah-h, so that's it," one said with relief.

They looked around comically to see where the remote control apparatus could be broadcasting from, and decided it must be one of the few parked cars visible. They never thought it odd that there was no radio nor aerial in my heap. They were dopes, sure enough. While they stood there debating the situation, I shifted quietly and drove away. Once again science was my ally. I figured it was a good omen.

Finally I got home safe a little after one o'clock and carried the Ottomeyer loot into the house. Careful not to expose my hands to the screen of rays, I tossed the two bundles onto the table to examine my haul.

The first was a sheaf of canceled checks. The other was a stack of betting markers. Can you beat it?

I couldn't tear my hair or even bury my head in my hands; that would have wrecked my fingers in the rays. All I could do was sit there like a dummy and groan and swear.

When the telephone rang. I bellied up to it till it was invisible and unracked the receiver.

"Is this University 2841?" a voice sounding kind of Oriental asked. "Mr. James Littleman?"

"It is. But Mr. Littleman can't be seen right now." Pretty good, huh?

"Our information," come back the other guy very bland, "is that Mr. Littleman is possessor of Chinese lottery ticket number 3X4049. Is this true?"

"Sure. So what? You mean to say I'm a winner?"

"Precisely. 3X4049 pays to its holder one thousand dollars. To collect, you must appear in person before two o'clock this afternoon, at the lottery headquarters. The address on Main Street is printed on your ticket. Congratulations, Mr. Littleman."

My jubilation was short-lived. "Two p.m.," I yelled. "That's impossible! You gotta give me more time!"

"So sorry," came the imperturbable voice. "It is the rule. So printed upon the back of your ticket. We have been trying to get you by telephone all morning."

"But I can't appear personally till after two. I'm invisible till then!"

There was a shocked silence at the other end of the wire, then the connection was quietly broken. I think my reason tottered. I would have committed suicide right then, only I couldn't see where to shoot myself.

What was it I always said about science? Aw, nuts!

THE END

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