

# **INTERPLANETARY HUNTRESS**

By

**Arthur K. Barnes**

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

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This is the first of three e-books reprinting all the adventures of Gerry Carlyle, Interplanetary Huntress, from the pages of Thrilling Wonder Stories in the 1940s and '50s.

Gerry Carlyle was the first woman character to earn her own series in the history of science fiction. There had been popular heroines in science fiction earlier – Dejah Thoris in the John Carter series, Aladoree Anthar in the Legion of Space novels, and Pat Burlingame in the Ham Hammond tales. But, however strong, daring or intelligent, they were clearly subordinate to the male protagonist, and existed primarily to be extricated from peril.

Gerry Carlyle didn't need rescuing. In fact, she did the rescuing!

Today – when the book stores abound with science fictional heroines like Silence Leigh, Laura Olamina and Moreta, Dragonlady of Pern; and from *Xenato Dark Angel* to those ladies from *Cleopatra 2525*, they have exploded onto our television and movie screens – this may not seem such an accomplishment. But back in 1939, when Arthur K. Barnes introduced his planet-hopping, "bring 'em back alive" huntress to the assembled ranks of adolescent males whom the sci-fi zines of the day were aimed at, it was a risky venture. Both author and editors are said to have held their breath, not sure whether to expect outrage or accolades.

They needn't have worried. The fearless Gerry captured sci-fi fans' hearts with the same ease as the alien lifeforms she pursued. After that Barnes couldn't keep up with the demand for more stories. (In fact, since he hand-crafted each one only when a genuinely original idea occurred to him, there are but seven Gerry Carlyle adventures in all – most written between 1938 and 1941, before the series and the author's civilian life were brought to a screeching halt by World War II.)

Though Gerry's exploits have been unavailable for up to sixty years, her impact was such that she has not been forgotten. A number of contemporary internet websites recall her fondly. For instance, the "Femme Fatales: Pulp's Crime-Fighting Heroines" site says, "Gerry Carlisle [is] an adventuress of the first water appearing in a string of adventures by Arthur K. Barnes in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. She traveled to distant planets to collect exotic specimens to bring to Earth's zoos." Gerry is also featured in a full-page portrait in *Firebrands: The Heroines of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, a recent pictorial book, in which award-winning artist Ron Miller offers his own visualization of many of the genres most beloved female characters, while author Pamela Sargent provides commentary. (You can see Miller's rendition on-line at his Black Cat Studios website.)

Even forty years ago, when the only collection of her adventures was gathered in book form (presenting less than half of the original stories), sci-fi critics and reviewers thought Gerry was a wow!

"Glamorous Gerry Carlyle returns in Arthur K. Barnes' *Interplanetary Huntress* based on the stories that first appeared in the late thirties," crowed Hans Stefan Santesson. "Gerry, backed by the resources of the London Interplanetary Zoo, travels from planet to planet trapping rare alien life forms and bringing them all back alive. Her voice is an ice-water jet except when she realizes that Tommy Strike is a wonderful guy, and she is in general a personality that is rather rare in a field where swashbucklers and people of action are so often space-versions of Mike Hammer."

Floyd C. Gale at *Galaxydelirious* under her spell raved: "This will take you back to the good old days of the middle years of S-F – the days of monsters and gimmicks. ... The heyday of Gerry Carlyle, the fabulously gorgeous interplanetary hunter

modeled with alterations after the glamour figure of the '30s, Frank Buck, this was sizzling stuff. Astonishingly, these stories are still surprisingly readable. If you like a huge collection of assorted BEMs [bug-eyed monsters] and well-thought-out gimmicks in tight situations, you will assuredly go for this."

So why deprive yourself a moment more?

Stand-by for the countdown and then it's rockets away! You are blasting off into the future – that is, the future as they imagined it back in 1935. We are off on a guided tour of the solar system – Venus, Saturn, Neptune, and the mysteries of the comets.

You'll be part of a crew sworn to capture the rarest, most dangerous lifeforms on all the outer and inner planets, and to bring them back alive no matter what the risk to yourself. You'll be in this and subsequent volumes up against that dinosaur-like, saw-tongued Venusian Whip, the fire-breathing Cacus of Satellite V, Jupiter's flying, acid-spitting Dermaphos, and on Almussen's comet the ferocious twenty-foot tall, three-headed Cyclops. But, don't worry, you are serving under Captain Gerry Carlyle, the most experienced huntress in the system and nothing has ever daunted her.

But, then she hasn't met Tommy Strike yet – the man she, and you, will love to hate. The one man who can melt her glacial self-control. Strike is a man who isn't about to be bossed by any woman, and Gerry is a woman who isn't about to be bossed by any man. Sparks fly, and then it's one long hilarious, battle-of-the-sexes – skirmish, feud and make up – after another. As *Amazing Stories* put it, "between watching the intrepid pair capture or slaughter the BEMs, and then squabble among themselves, there's plenty of action for any deep-dyed thud-and-blunder fan."

Spacemen and spacewomen, I give you Gerry Carlyle, Interplanetary Huntress. And need I add, fasten your seatbelts. First stop's Venus.

Jean Marie Stine

9/24/2001

*Watch for the next Futures-Past/PageTurner E-Books release, and be sure to visit our free on-line magazine of classic science fiction see rare covers and illustrations from the Gerry Carlyle stories, plus articles by the author about each story, and news of forthcoming e-books. URL:*  
<http://www.hometown.aol.com/pulplady/FUTURES.html/>

# ASSIGNMENT ONE

## THE HOTHOUSE WORLD

### CHAPTER I

#### The Ark

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

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

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

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

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

"Why, Gerry Carlyle! The great Carlyle is coming today. In his special ship, with his trained crew, straight from the Interplanetary Zoo in London. The famous 'Catch-'em-alive Carlyle' is on his way and we're the lucky guys chosen to guide him on his expedition on Venus!"

Ransom scratched one thick hairy leg and stepped under the shower with a sour expression. "Ain't that somethin'?" he inquired.

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

"No, I don't. I've heard all I want to hear about him. Capturing animals from different planets and bringing them back alive to the Zoo in London is all right. I'd like the job myself. But any guy that rates the sickening amount of publicity he does must have something phony about 'im." He kicked toward the short-wave radio in one corner of the living room.

"Bein' so close to the sun, we're lucky if we bring in a couple of Earth programs a day through the interference. An' it seems to me every damn' one of 'em has somethin' about the famous Carlyle. Gerry Carlyle eats Lowden's Vita-cubes on expedition. Gerry Carlyle smokes germ-free Suaves. Gerry Carlyle drinks refreshen' Alka-lager. Pfui!

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

Tommy Strike laughed good naturedly.

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

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

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

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

Ransom snorted in wordless disgust at this fantastic hope.

"Anyhow," insisted Strike, determined to see the cheerful side, "even if there is any disturbance, it always blows over in a few days. I'm heading for the landing field. They're just about due."

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

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

A few steps took him to the safety of the rear of the station, where abandoned calcium carbonate tanks loomed like metal giants in the fog. There was a time when it had been necessary to pump the stuff to the miniature space-port a safe distance away whenever a ship was about to land.

There, sprayed forth from thousands of tiny nozzles high into the air, its tremendous affinity for water carved a clear vertical tunnel in the fog for the approaching spaceship pilot. New telescopic developments, however, rendered the device obsolete.

Strike paced deliberately along the trail that paralleled the ancient pipeline – Earthlings soon learn not to overexert in that atmosphere – and before he had covered half of it his quick ears caught the shrill whine of a spacecraft plunging recklessly into the Venusian air-envelope.

It rose to a nerve-rasping pitch, then dropped sharply away to silence. Presently, sounding curiously muffled and distorted through the clouds, came the noise of opening ports, the clang of metal upon metal, voices. Gerry Carlyle and company had arrived.

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

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

The Ark, of course, was one of the new centrifugal flyers, containing in her stem a centrifuge of unbelievable power with millions of tiny rotors running in blasts of compressed air, generating sufficient energy to hurl the ship through space at tremendous speeds. The equipment of The Ark, too, was the talk of the System.

Carlyle, backed by the resources of the Interplanetary Zoo, had turned the ship into a floating laboratory, with a compartment for the captured specimens arranged to

duplicate exactly the life conditions of their native planets. All the newer scientific inventions were included in her operating apparatus – the paralysis ray, antigravity, electronic telescope, a dozen other things the trader knew by name only.

His musings were interrupted by the approach of a snappily uniformed man who saluted, smiling.

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

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

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

The trader stared, thunderstruck. In those days of advanced plastic surgery, feminine beauty wasn't rare but even Strike's unpracticed eye knew that here was the real thing. No synthetic blonde baby-doll here but a natural beauty untouched by the surgeon's knife-spun-gold hair, intelligence lighting dark eyes, a hint of passion and temper in the curve of mouth and arch of nostrils. In short, a woman.

But Miss Carlyle's voice was an ice-water jet to remind the trader of earthside manners.

"You don't seem enthusiastic over meeting your temporary employer, Mr. Strike. Something wrong about me?"

Strike flushed, angry at himself and his own embarrassment. "Oh oh, no." He fumbled for words. "That is, I'm surprised that you're a woman. I – we expected to find a man in-well, in your position. It's more like a man's job."

Sub-pilot Barrows could have warned the trader that this was a touchy point with Gerry Carlyle but he had no chance. The young woman drew herself up and spoke coldly.

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

Strike's eyebrow twitched. An arrogant female, withal. Terrific sense of her own importance, willful, selfish. He decided he didn't like her and rather hoped she had come looking for Murriss. If so, she would learn one or two bitter lessons.



There followed a five-minute interlude of scurrying about and shouting and unloading, all done to the tune of Gerry Carlyle's voice, which could crack like a whiplash when issuing commands.

Then Strike found himself leading a small party back to the trading post. Now surprisingly Miss Carlyle showed a flattering attention to him.

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

"It isn't very exciting," its proprietor told her. "Mostly we sit around being bored stiff, playing cards or fiddling with the bum radio. Several times during a Venusian day our natives bring in a load of some of the medicinal plants we want. Occasion a rough gem of one kind or another, though Venus is very poor in minerals. The only stone really worth much to be found here is the emerald."

"Surely there isn't enough profit in medicinal plants, considering transportation costs, to persuade a young man like you to bury himself here." She waved her hand around disparagingly.

"There's profit all right." Strike shrugged. "The drugs distilled from some of the Venusian growths are plenty valuable. And then there's the adventure angle." He smiled wryly.

"Plenty of young bucks are willing to sign a three-year contract for the thrills of living on Venus – if they don't know a thing about it beforehand. But it does take an awful lot stuff to bring a freighter our way. We seldom see a ship more often than three or four Earth-months apart!"

"What in the world – or in Venus are those?" She directed his attention to the thousands of fungi now springing up through moist soil with almost visible movement. They were shaped somewhat like the human body and so pale that they might be a host of tiny corpses rising from their graves.

The trader grimaced. He had never liked those things. Reminded him constantly that battle and destruction were watchwords in this hellhole, where the fang of every creature was turned upon its neighbor and even the plants had poison thorns while the flowers gave off noxious gases to snare the unwary.

"Fungi mostly," he answered. "They grow and propagate amazingly fast. Many of the smaller life-forms here exist on a single day – they are born, live and die in one hundred seventy hours. Naturally their life cycle is speeded up. In hours all these puffballs will begin popping at once to spread their spores around. It's a funny sight. During the long night, of course, the spores lie dormant. And most of the larger creatures hibernate from the intense cold. Our night life up here is nil. This is strictly a nine-o'clock planet."

She sniffed noting what all newcomers to Venus learn. Although the view is a drab almost colorless one, an incredible multiplicity of odors assails the nostrils – sweet, sharp, musklike, pungent, spicy, with many unfamiliar olfactory sensations to boot.

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

So it went, question and answer, the pleasant business of getting acquainted, until the all-too-short walk to the station was over. But Strike was not deceived by the woman's sudden change of attitude.

He knew that an interplanetary hunter of Gerry Carlyle's experience would certainly have read up on Venus before ever coming there. And he suspected she knew the answers already to every question she asked.

She must have noticed Strike's disapproving eyebrow during the first moments of their meeting and had deliberately set out to ingratiate herself to promote harmony during her brief stay on the cloudy planet. The trader was willing to be friendly but he looked upon the woman with caution and distaste. Her aggressiveness was not to his taste.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **The Huntress**

Gerry Carlyle was decidedly a woman of action.

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

Strike nodded, staring at this disturbing young woman, who could be one instant so warm and friendly, the next imperious and dominating.

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

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

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

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

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

"One moment." Gerry Carlyle's cool voice struck in abruptly. "I want two things thoroughly understood. First, I'm the sole leader of this party and what I say goes." She smiled with icy sweetness. "No complaints, of course, Mr. Strike, but it's just as well to forestall future misunderstandings.

"Secondly, you must know that the main object of this expedition is to catch one or more Murris and return with them alive. We'll take a number of other interesting specimens, of course, but the Murri is our real goal."

She looked around challengingly, as if expecting a dissenting reaction. And she was not disappointed. Strike glanced up at the porch to exchange a significant look with Ransom.

When he smiled wryly, Gerry Carlyle's temper flared.

"What is the mystery about this Murri, anyhow? Everywhere I go, on Venus, back on Earth among members of my own profession, if the word Murri is mentioned everyone scowls and tries to change the subject. Why?"

No one answered. The Carlyle party shifted uneasily, their boots making shucking sounds. Presently Strike offered, "The fact is, you'll never take back a Murri alive. But you wouldn't believe me if I told you the reason, Miss Carlyle. I—"

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

"Oh. no."

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

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

"Then are they so delicate they can't stand the trip? If so, I can tell you we've done everything to make hold number three an exact duplicate of living conditions here."

"No, it isn't that either," the trader sighed.

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

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

Tommy Strike shook his head firmly.

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

And on that note of dissatisfaction the party struck off through the mist. The half-dozen crew members from The Ark were surprised to find the going comparatively easy.

Although the great amount of water on Venus would presuppose profuse jungle growth, there is insufficient sunlight to support much more than the tallest varieties of trees, which shoot hundreds of feet up into the curtain of the mist, their broad-bladed leaves spread wide to treasure every stray sunbeam that filters through.

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

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

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

The entire party paused for an instant at that blast of strange thunder. Startled by the sound out of nowhere.

The trader grinned. "Shovel-mouth," he explained. "Not very dangerous."

Gerry Carlyle glanced at her guide catching his implication. "We prefer 'em dangerous, as a matter of fact. Though I hardly expected to find anything interesting this close to-er-civilization."

Strike grinned at the thrust and a little prickle of excitement crawled up his spine as he watched the Carlyle party slip into their smooth routine. Her crisp commands detailed one man to remain with the bulky equipment. Two more loaded a pair of cathode-bolt guns, baby cannons beside the pistol the trader carried for emergencies.

Two of the others, including Gerry, selected weapons resembling the old-fashioned rifles-now to be seen only in museums. Barrows was to work the camera.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The creature was worth a second look. Fifty feet long and nearly twenty feet wide, it had three pairs of squat powerful legs ending in enormously spatulate discs. Its hide was a thick, tough gray stuff that gleamed dully with a wet slickness in the half light.

But the most surprising feature was the creature's head which, instead of tapering to a point, broadened into a mammoth snout extending several feet horizontally from mouth-corner to mouth-corner. Flattened against the ground it had a ludicrous similarity to a fan-tail vacuum cleaner attachment.

The shovel-mouth stared at the party disinterestedly out of muddy eyes, then lowered his head and waddled across the clearing. Its mouth plowed up a wide shallow furrow as it ate indiscriminately the numerous fungi, low-lying bushes, sticks and mud.

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

Evidently the animal had been dining for some time, for the clearing looked as if a drunken farmer had been trying to plow it up. Gerry signaled, and her crew moved into position like soldiers. She slipped up on the creature's blind side and aimed her curious rifle at the soft, inner portion of the shovel-mouth's leg.

Plop! The beast jerked, nipped at the wound momentarily, then continued to feed. Twenty seconds later it reeled dizzily about and fell to the ground, unconscious.

Just like that – simple, efficient, no fuss at all. Tommy Strike felt a sense of anticlimax.

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

"With Mr. Strike heroically rescuing Gerry Carlyle from the jaws of death?" She smiled as the trader winced. "Sorry, but this is a business, Mr. Strike, and I find it pays to play safe and sane and preserve my crew intact."

"I value them too much to risk their lives for the sake of a bunch of cheap thrill seekers back home. No. We have excitement and adventure only when someone makes a mistake. Carlyle parties make a minimum of mistakes."

That was the arrogant and cocksure Gerry Carlyle speaking and Strike did not try to dispute her. "I suppose you used a sort of hypodermic bullet in that rifle of yours. But I thought you'd be using more scientific weapons than that. It seems sort of – sort of primitive."

Gerry smiled.

"I know. You're wondering about the anesthetic gases. Or the wonderful new paralysis ray. Well, there're a lot of inventions that work fine under controlled lab conditions that are flops in the field.

"The paralysis ray is just a toy, totally impracticable. It's unreliable because each species of animal requires a different amount of the ray to subdue him and we seldom have time to fool around experimenting in my work.

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

Strike nodded understanding and turned to be surprised by the activity behind him. While he and the woman talked, the party had prepared the motionless shovel-mouth for transportation back to The Ark. Broad bands of bluish metal had been fastened around legs and neck and the crew had even managed to slide two or three underneath the huge body and encircle it.

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

"Anti-gravity," explained Gerry. "We give the metal bands a gravity charge of slightly more than one. Like repelling magnetic charges, they rise from the ground and carry the animal with them."

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

"I think," said Gerry Carlyle, "that we're too likely to bump into something without warning in this mist. If you'll bring out the electronic telescope, Mr. Barrows—"

Barrows at once produced one of the most interesting gadgets that Strike had yet seen, a portable model of the apparatus used on all the modern centrifugal flyers. It consisted of a power unit carried by one of the men, and a long glass tube to be carried by the observer.

The front of it presented a convex surface covered with photoelectric material, to capture the electron streams of all kinds of light, from ultra-violet to infra-red.

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

By keeping in constant touch with Ransom at the post, who kept the beam moving

slowly around like the spoke of a wheel, Strike enabled the party to move laterally.

Through the telescope they picked up many of the smaller and shyer life-forms not ordinarily seen – lizards, crawling shapes, crablike forms, even two or three of the scaly man-things native to Venus, slithering silently through the fog with sulky expressions on their not-too-intelligent fishlike faces.

Strike and Gerry became so interested in watching this teeming life through the 'scope that they walked into real danger.

Without warning a rushing sound filled the air at their left, and a round gray ball rolled swiftly into view. It crossed their path dead ahead – propelling itself with dozens of stout cilia sprouting indiscriminately from all sides – then paused abruptly.

The miniature forest of arms waved delicately and exploringly in the air as if trying to locate the source of a new disturbance. Then the fantastic thing rushed unerringly at the Carlyle party.

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

"Rotifer," said Strike shortly. "Something like the tiny animalcules back on Earth, magnified many times and adapted for land travel. Venus is largely aqueous and was even more so at one time. Much of its terrestrial life developed from lifeforms originally dwelling in the water–"

He stepped aside again casually as the rotifer rumbled by. "They have their uses, though. That half-hidden mouth of theirs takes in everything it contacts. They're the scavengers of this planet. We call 'em Venusian buzzards."

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

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

There was truth in that, so the rotifer was dispatched with a cathode bolt. But as they crowded around to examine this curious bit of protoplasmic phenomena, a shrill scream as shocking as the shriek of a wounded horse tore through from the upper air. They swiveled about to gaze upon the most terrifying of all products of Venusian vertebrate evolution.

Fully fifty feet the monster towered into the mist, standing upright on two massive legs reminiscent of the extinct terrestrial *Tyrannosaurus rex*. A set of short forelegs were equipped with hideously lethal claws. The head was long and narrow



resembling a wolf's snout, with large ears and slavering fangs.

Everything about the nightmare creature was constructed for efficient annihilation, particularly of those animals who mistakenly sought safety in the tops of the tall trees.

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

The crew looked uncertainly to Gerry Carlyle, who promptly countermanded the order.

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

She flipped up her rifle, fired at a likely spot. Strike groaned as the monstrous whip squealed shrilly again and again, staring down at the tiny Earthlings from fiery eyes.

Then from that wolfish snout uncurled an amazing fifty-foot length of razor-edged tongue, like that of a terran anteater. Straight at Gerry Carlyle it lashed out, cracking sharply. Strike's rush caught her from behind sprawling her on the spongy earth.

"Curl up in a ball," he yelled in her ear, "so it can't get any purchase with that tongue!"

Gerry obeyed and Strike turned to warn the others as the whip swished over her ducking head.

"Scatter!" he cried. "Don't—"

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

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

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

All possibility of rescue being gone, the reserve gunners lowered their deadly guns

and allowed the hunters to go about the job of subduing the monster.

Little snapping reports sounded in rapid succession – three, four, five.

And presently the whip reeled like a tower in an earthquake. It swayed. A few wavering steps described a short half circle. Then quietly it flopped awkwardly down and passed into insensibility.

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

"Whew! That was too close for comfort!"

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

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

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

No emotion disturbed the serenity of her face.

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

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

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

Then she turned her back on Strike and snapped orders to prepare the whip for transportation back to The Ark. But in the last tiny instant as she turned away Strike glimpsed something in her eye which provided him with sudden and complete revelation.

It explained at once the reason for Gerry Carlyle's shell of impersonal reserve and callousness. She was a woman walking in a man's world, speaking man's language, using man's tools.

As a constant companion of men she had to train herself to live their life, meet them on their own terms. To command their respect she felt she had no right to use the

natural endowments of charm and beauty which nature had given her.

Indeed, she dared not use them, for fear of the consequences. To give way to feminine emotion would be, she feared, to lose her domination over her male subordinates. She was, in short, that most beleaguered of beings – a woman who dared not let herself be a woman.

All this Tommy Strike guessed and his feelings toward Gerry Carlyle began to change from dislike to pity and perhaps to something warmer. For he was certain he had seen real tears unshed.

## CHAPTER III

### The Murris

The succeeding days passed swiftly as specimen after weird specimen was subdued and carried to the rapidly filling hold of The Ark.

Strike's only worry was the ever-approaching hour when he must produce a Murri or face Gerry's wrath. And although he knew it was coming, still the demand arrived too suddenly for him on the morning of the sixth day.

"Mr. Strike." Not once had the young woman dropped her shield of formality. "I've been pretty patient with your repeated sidetracking of my request for a Murri. But our visit here is almost over. We leave in forty-eight hours. To remain grounded during a Venusian night would mean a tiresome and dangerous journey home. Come on – no more stalling."

Strike looked at her. "What if I refuse?"

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

The trader nodded, shrugged.

"All right. Just a second while I–"

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

"Thought you'd be needing this, Tommy," he said significantly with a disgusted

glance at Gerry.

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

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

Strike was willing to explain.

"The power unit of this 'contraption' consists of a vacuum tube oscillator and amplifier and the receiver unit of an inductance bridge and vacuum-tube amplifier. There's also a set of headphones" – he held them up in classroom style – "and an exploring coil.

"The bridge is energized by a sinusoidal current, brought to balance by appropriate resistance and inductance controls. If a conductive body comes within the artificially created magnetic field of the coil, eddy currents set up in the conductive mass will reduce the effective inductance of the exploring coil, serving to unbalance the bridge. This condition is indicated in the headphones–"

"Stop! Stop!" Gerry covered her ears with her hands. "I know an ore-finding doodle-bug when I see one! I just wanted to know why you're carrying it with you now."

"Oh, for protection."

"Protection against what?"

"The natives."

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

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

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

"That's no joke," Strike said with a touch of bitterness. "It's a fact. Ever since Murray made his first trip to Venus the natives have gone for gold teeth in a big way. They took Murray for a god, you know, and emulated him in many ways.

"He had several gold teeth, relics of childhood dentistry, so the natives promptly scraped up some of the cheaply impure gold that's found around here and made caps for their teeth. As for their not hurting us, Miss Carlyle, that remains to be seen.

"It has always meant trouble when one of you animal-catchers tries to mess around with the Murris. You'll understand me better in a few minutes." He shrugged and twitched his eyebrows. "I'm just being prepared."

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

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

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

Gerry completely forgot to be indignant at Strike's holdout. She was swept away in a gale of merriment that overcame the party at sight of the strange creatures.

Perhaps half of the colony was in constant motion, scrambling round and round the huge bole of the tree, up and down, popping in and out of their holes out along the mighty frondlike branches and back frantically. The others simply sat watching in solemn indifference, occasionally opening their pouting lips to ask sorrowfully—"Murri? Murri? Murri?"

They were well named. Though soft and grayish-brown, with scanty hair growth on their backs, their size and antics did resemble terrestrial simians. With their tremendous nasal development, they looked much like the Proboscis monkey.

And this very de Bergerac beak of a nose made their name even more appropriate, for Sidney Murray, Stanhope's co-explorer, was famous throughout the System for having the hugest and ugliest nose extant.

The Pseudo-simia Murri colony presented to the eyes of the fascinated watchers a hundred facial replicas of Sidney Murray, spinning and dancing fantastically around the tree.

"Oh!" gasped Gerry finally, wiping laughter's tears from her cheeks. "Oh, but this is wonderful! Who—who named them?"

Strike looked solemnly at her. "Murray himself named 'em. He has quite a sense of humor."

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

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

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

They moved up to the cycad and examined the Murris at close quarters. They were quite tame. The close inspection revealed three facts of interest.

The first was the presence of short, prehensile tail equipped with a vicious-appearing sting near the tip. "Only a weak defensive mechanism," Strike explained, "a Murri live almost exclusively on the datelike fruits of the tree they live in. The sting's no worse than a bee sting." He extended one knotty forearm, showing a small pockmark where he had once been stung.

The second was the large brown eyes possessed by the Murri which stared at the intruders unblinkingly with a heart-wringing hypnotic expression of sorrow. "They look as if they'd seen all the trouble and woe in the Universe," Barrows said. "Makes me feel like a louse to take them away from their home!"

The third was a heap of strangely incongruous junk piled at the base of the big tree. There were cheap clocks, gewgaws, matches, children's fireworks, odds and ends. "Offerings by the natives," explained Strike. "That's the legal tender up here. Medicinal weeds and rough gems in exchange for those things." He gestured at the pile of trash. "Anything fire-producing is especially valuable. The Murri is the natives' god – because of his resemblance to Sidney Murray, the First God."

There was more laughter, but subdued this time as the party realized that removing one or more Murris would be to commit Venusian sacrilege.

"I see now what you meant by 'causing trouble,'" Gerry said. "But it can't be too much for you to handle. It's happened before, I assume, and always blew over. These primitives – if that's your only reason for dissuading us to capture a few—"

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

"More mystery!" Gerry snorted and supervised the set-up of a big net under one of the longer overhanging branches.

Then two well-directed shots snapped the limb and catapulted a half dozen astonished Murris into the net. With incredible agility most of them bounced into the air and scrambled to safety. But one was caught in the tricky meshes. The ends of the net were quickly folded together to form a bag.

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

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

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

"Murri-murri-murri?"

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

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

The little captive burst into a flurry of wild activity, struggling with unbelievable fury to escape. He twisted, clawed, spat, bit. As the carriers bore him inevitably further away from his home he seemed to go absolutely mad, stinging himself repeatedly with barbed tail in an outburst of insane terror.

After a series of heart-rending cries of despair he gave a final frenzied outburst that ended with a gout of pale straw-colored blood from his mouth.

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

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

Strike answered her bewildered glance with melancholy triumph.

"Agoraphobia. Murris are the most pronounced agoraphobes in the System. They spend their whole lives on and around the particular tree in which they're born. Take 'em a few yards away and they have a nervous breakdown ending in convulsion and death."

He indicated the dead body in the net. "I could have told you but you wouldn't have believed me. You'd have come to find out for yourself anyhow."

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

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

"Partly."

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

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

"Right!" Gerry determined.

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

"And so?"

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

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

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

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

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

Strike shook his head.

"No. That tough little Carlyle is over there in her ship learning a mighty bitter lesson. She won't leave now. She won't leave for some time," he predicted. "Wait and see."

But only to himself did he admit that he wanted badly to see that incredible woman again.

## CHAPTER IV



## The Stolen Shrine

Strike was right. As the absolute darkness of Venusian night dragged its black cloak over the trading post light footsteps ran up the stairs outside. Knuckles beat on the metal door which Ransom opened. Gerry Carlyle pushed in.

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

The trader shrugged. "So why come to me?"

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

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

Gerry's eyes flashed blue fire.

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

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

Gerry went away furious but was back within twenty-four hours. She was beginning to show the strain. Her hair was awry, her eyes blood-shot from lack of sleep.

"Strike," she begged, "can't you suggest anything? They're growing thinner by the hour. You can see them waste away. If you've been holding something back just to-to discipline me I'll say, 'Uncle.' Only please—"

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

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

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

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

"Tommy," she wailed. "I can't stand it any longer. They just sit there, so helpless, so frail, without a sound, and stare at me. Those pathetic brown eyes follow me wherever I go.

"They-they're mesmerizing me. I see them in darkness – I see them in my dreams when I manage to get to sleep. It's pitiful – and horrible. Even the crew goes around now with silent accusation in their faces. I can't stand it."

Strike's heart went out to this bewildered woman.

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

"Yes. I understand. Rogers was ashamed to admit what he thought was a weakness. Embarrassed to have anyone think a funny little Venusian monkey could soften him up by just staring at him with those hypnotic brown eyes.

"I-I sent the boys out to find that tree and dig it up whole, Murris and all to transport back to earth. I thought that might solve the difficulty. But I see now it wouldn't."

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

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

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

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

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

"Doesn't affect them. They evolved from an aqueous lifeform and like it cold. Fewer natural dangers for them at night too."

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

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

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

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

A quick run brought them to the clearing. Stationary lights made a ring about the workers, who had already fastened antigravity plates to the tree and were loosening the frozen soil. Strike's voice rang out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strike forced himself to lie quietly while the visible world rocked like a storm-lashed ship. He was conscious of the frightened yells of the stricken workmen, a rush of feet, the monosyllabic squeaks and rasps of the Venusians, whose gilllike breathing system filtered out all the poisonous elements of the atmosphere.

Then Gerry's startled scream knifed his consciousness. Just one outcry, no begging for help. But the sounds of her struggle were plain as she was carried away.

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

But Strike, on the extreme edge of the clearing, had inhaled only a little of the gas. He lay with his face close to the frozen earth, breathing cautiously, testing every lungful for tell-tale odors, then exhaling vigorously.

Gradually the earth slowed its spinning as the stuff worked off. Strike became conscious of a splitting headache as if every nerve-end in his skull were raw and throbbing. But as he took in the scene before him all thought of his own discomfort vanished in a wave of horror. The natives were out for revenge and Gerry Carlyle was their intended victim!

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

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

Strike started up in a frenzy, yelling. Rubbery knees promptly sent him to the ground again. Not yet. No strength. He whispered a prayer for something to delay that outstretched native finger hovering over the power unit.

Perhaps he would move it the wrong way and – but Strike went cold all over at the thought. He wasn't sure, but wouldn't that smash Gerry into a bloody pulp, grind her into a shapeless mess?

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

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

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

Few flew low enough to hit Strike and those were glancing blows that simply left red welts across his back. He saw perfectly the entire scene as his unwitting allies, the whiz-bangs, stormed into the clearing.

It was as if someone had loosed a series of shotgun charges at the natives. The leader of the Venusians dropped as if cathoded when several of the armored beetles rifled into his most vulnerable spot, the throat.

The natives set up a hideous thin wailing. They ducked. They flailed about them with vigorous futility. Finally they broke and ran wildly away into the dark, dropping even their weapons.

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

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

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

"Well, young lady, I trust you've learned two lessons this night. One, that even a Gerry Carlyle can't always have her way – especially with the Murriss. Two, that a mere man, even if only to make an occasional unwanted sacrifice, can sometimes

come in pretty handy."

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

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

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

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

## **ASSIGNMENT TWO**

### **THE DUAL WORLD**

#### **CHAPTER V**

##### **The Lost Continent**

The space ship loomed like a mysterious monster in the hot, swirling mists. It lay quiescent on a vast, lonely stretch of hard-packed beach. Immediately westward, barely to be seen in the eternal fog, lay the sluggish gray wastes of the Mare Gigantum, greatest of all the Venusian seas. The Solar tide was creeping in, and steaming waves charged the shore like bulls with lowered heads.

Two people crawled about the gleaming hull, equipped with magnetic shoes. Both wore antiseptic helmets, as they worked slowly forward from stem to bow. The foremost carried a heat-ray gun, with the beam diffused and spread wide. Every time he came to one of the many ugly yellowish blotches that dotted the hull, he rayed it out of existence, then moved on. Tommy Strike, co-captain of one of the mightiest ships in the System, was doing out of sheer ennui work fit for the lowliest motoroiler in the crew.

"Granted," Strike grumbled to his long-suffering companion, "I don't know anything about handling a centrifugal flier like this. Just the same, Gerry made me co-captain,

and it's my duty to learn. But every time I slip into the pilot-house she runs me out. Says I'm like a man in a kitchen, with a positive genius for getting in the way!"

"Yes, sir." Sub-pilot Barrows carefully examined a spot cleared by the blast of Strike's weapon, looking for evidence of pitting. If he found any, a spray of liquid metal quickly remedied the damage. "Yes, sir, I believe the periodic wind has about subsided."

"You'd think she'd at least let me head one of the hunting parties. I know a damn sight more about this planet than any of the others. But no, one of the captains must remain with the ship, and since Gerry Carlyle always leads the hunt! My orders are countermanded, and I sit around twiddling my thumbs. A guy don't mind being babied part of the time, but I want to marry a woman, not a flock of apron strings!"

"Yes, sir. I guess we're about through, sir." Barrows was trying desperately to change the subject.

"I tell you I'm ripe, Barrows, ripe for rebellion!" Strike waved his gun around in good-natured melodrama. But beneath his good humor there was a warning note of seriousness.

"Yes, sir," said Barrows, still trying. "Amazing how versatile these bacterial colonies are, particularly in these latitudes."

As he spoke, a culture sailed up on the dying wings of the breeze and smacked right across the name-plate of The Ark. It was a nasty, gummy mess. Strike rayed it viciously.

"Not so amazing. Back on Earth bacteria multiply rapidly as sin. They have great adaptability; they have motility; they release acids and virulent toxins. Small wonder these giant bacteria have developed further in conditions like these," he sent his heat-beam hissing into the fog, "so they ride the periodic winds and destroy nearly everything they touch. Infection is terribly fast on Venus."

As soon as the regular air raid of bacteria and fungus spores had ceased, the ship was quickly cleaned. The two figures scrambled awkwardly to the ground, made their way to an open port. It was like stepping into bedlam. The entire rear half of the ship, partitioned off into numerous holds for comfortable transportation of the strange life-forms that were the expedition's objectives, was in a terrific uproar.

Squeals, yowls, hisses, roars-every conceivable variation of audible animal fury assaulted the ear-drums. For "Catch-'em-alive" Carlyle, as usual, had been extremely successful during her brief visit to the unknown northern latitudes of Venus.

Almost hourly the hunting parties returned with magnificent specimens – everything from the incredible Atlas crab to the sea squirrel, the little rodent with feet like

sea-sleds, which ran about agilely over the surface of the ocean, and whose body contained so much oil that the stuff squeezed out of its eyes and splashed from its opened mouth.

They even had one of the rare and famous bolas-birds, the only flying creature of any size native to Venus, with infra-red-sensitive eyes to pierce the mists. It carried three bony structures dangling from its body on tough strings of cartilage; these were used as a weapon much like the ancient Argentine bolas, to ensnare victims. The bolas-bird was its own worst enemy, frequently strangling itself in the excitement of a chase.

Strike put away his helmet, grimaced at the clamor, and led the way along the main corridor to the chart-room in the bow of the ship. There he found Gerry Carlyle, poring over incomplete maps and faded notes. As always when coming into the presence of that amazing young woman, her matchless beauty caught him at his throat. He watched for a moment the familiar curves of her profile, the stubborn chin, the tousled mop of silken blond hair. Then she sensed his presence and turned.

"Hi, Tommy."

'Hi, Gerry." They grinned at each other. They didn't often have moments alone, with all barriers down. "About ready to pull out o' here? We've got a nifty cargo this time."

"Yes. Splendid haul." Gerry thoughtfully took a small tablet from a packet on the table, put it in her mouth to suck.

"Good Lord!" Tommy said in disgust. "Just because you endorsed those things is no sign you have to use 'em, too! Why—"

"The Energine people gave me a fat check for that endorsement; I believe in loyalty to an employer. Besides, they're not so bad. 'Be Buoyant – Eat Energines!'" She laughed. "As I was going to say, though, our hunting is about finished here, and I'll be ready to leave after we make a try at finding the Lost Continent."

Strike's eyes gleamed. The Lost Continent of Venus, a myth, a legend, a romantic fabrication of fictioneers based on a scrap of map, a half dozen lines in a log-book. Sidney Murray, greatest of the early interplanetary explorers, had hastily sketched in a few cryptic lines on his Venusian map, indicating a continent or large island in Mare Gigantum; six sentences in the log told of passing hurriedly over this uncharted region as they left the planet. From that day henceforward no Earthman apparently had ever set eyes on this mysterious land and returned to tell of it.

"You know," mused Gerry, "it's funny no one but Murray ever saw this elusive continent or island. Others have tried to find it, too. In fact, some have searched for it and never returned. Odd—"



Strike was reminded of his grievance.

"Well, we'll know more about that when and if we locate the place. No use speculating about it. But look, Gerry. I've been thinking—"

"Hear, hear!"

"That despite the fact we've had a successful trip, there's still lots of room left in the holds. So I was wondering—"

"Well?"

"Well, I'm more or less extra baggage around here, and I thought nobody'd mind if I roped in a few specimens of my own. I could pick up a pretty fair piece of change for 'em back on Earth. Enough maybe to buy a marriage license and post the bond." That was during the brief political tenure of the Domestic Tranquility party—referred to as the D. T.'s by the opposition press – one of whose platform planks was the posting of a bond by every prospective husband and bride, to be forfeited upon failure of either party to do his or her utmost to build a happy home.

Gerry looked dubious.

"There's a standard price for most of this extra-planetary stuff, you know, and it's plenty high. Not many places can afford it. Besides, there aren't a half dozen zoos on Earth equipped to maintain Venusian life. You weren't figuring on under-selling me and the other hunters to the regular buyers, were you?"

"Lord, no, Gerry! As a matter of fact, I'd thought of selling them to the motion picture people. Nine Planets Pictures—" Strike's voice trailed off into nothingness. Gerry's smooth white jaw had suddenly become firm, and anger sparkled in her eyes like salt on candle flames.

"That outfit of phonies?" she cried. "Never I. That's something I absolutely forbid, Tommy! The movies! Why, that whole business is a rank fake! Papier mache sets, sound dubbed in after the picture is filmed, half-scale tin space ships for their interplanetary sequences. But what gets me is what they do when they want a Jovian or a Venusian monster for one of their cheap melodramas.

"You know what they do? Their overpaid biochemists get busy and manufacture a creation with no more life or soul than a robot. Press a button and he swipes the heroine; press another and he eats the villain. And Nine Planets Pictures has the colossal nerve to foist these things off on the public as the genuine article! It's false, Tommy! It's not right! They're fakers!"

"But what magnificent fakers," murmured Strike, softly so Gerry wouldn't hear.

Barrows had come and was hovering anxiously about, trying to avert a quarrel, exuding peace and good-fellowship all over the chartroom,

But Gerry's tongue was in a favorite groove, her feud that was becoming the delight of the System. She always took as a personal insult any fancied slight upon her profession or the strange lifeforms with which it dealt.

"The main reason I'm even bothering to look for this doubtful Lost Continent is because Nine Planets is making a picture called 'Lost Continent.' A week before we took off from London, that baboon Von Zorn came pussyfooting around my business manager. Wanted to know if I intended to bring back any specimens from the Lost Continent.

"He knew it'd make him look silly. So he made me an offer. 'My dear Miss Carlyle'." Gerry was an excellent mimic. "'If you could-er-see your way clear to-um-represent Nine Planets Pictures on your forthcoming expedition-ah-it would be worth a good deal to us. Something spectacular, you know? To-uh-place in the lobby of Froman's Mercurian Theatre the night of the premiere.' He made that proposition knowing very well I'd have to break my contract with the London Interplanetary Zoo to agree. You can imagine what I said to him."

"Yes. I can imagine." Strike began to look uncomfortable.

Barrows fluttered.

"So if we find anything interesting, we'll arrange to make Von Zorn squirm when he releases his picture. Oh, no, Tommy. No specimens for the movies. That's out!"

Tommy Strike could usually take Gerry's domineering attitude for what it was – a hard-talking sort of bluff that she put on to command the respect and complete loyalty of her crew. But sometimes her act was a bit too realistic. This time he had to choke back a hot retort. He smiled equably.

"So the captain hates the films."

"Exactly. Besides, all the boys are busy on routine stuff, Tommy."

"I might pick up a few commercial specimens myself," he argued mildly. "I'm not exactly a stranger here, you know. I can get around."

Gerry groaned. "Oh, Tommy. Do not you understand anything about discipline? How many times have you read those signs? Don't they mean something to you?"

Strike didn't bother to look up, he knew those signs by heart.

"If the rules governing conduct in this ship seem severe, remember they are the composite of years' experience, calculated best to serve the interests of economy and personal safety."

Gerry had a weakness for polysyllabics. Above the annunciator was another one.

**We are in a dangerous trade. Failure to cooperate fully jeopardizes the lives of your companions and courts disaster.**

Similar Carlyleisms were placed in strategic spots all over the ship, in the control rooms, crew's quarters, and even the washrooms, sentiments designed to inculcate strict obedience and complete submergence of all personalities to that of Gerry Carlyle. Strike had always felt that while they were essential to insure smooth work and a minimum of accidents with a party strange to the planet, they were never meant to apply to Tommy Strike, who knew Venus as only a veteran Venusian trader can know it.

But now Gerry turned the full battery of her eyes on him. And for a moment all the efficiency and businesslike hardness fell away from her like a poorly fitting cloak, and she was all soft and tender and desirable.

"Tommy," she whispered. "Don't you see these rules are for my sake, too? What would happen to me if you went off alone and didn't come back?"

Strike felt his resistance draining away as if a spigot had been turned inside him. "Okay, Gerry," he said. "You win."

But in Strike's cabin was a contract signed by Von Zorn, offering generous rates for anything Strike brought in from the Lost Continent. Gerry or no Gerry, there was big money to be made, money that would remove from Strike the stigma of fortune-hunter when he married the woman.

He looked calculatingly at Barrows.

He had always considered the sub-pilot a weak vessel, but he couldn't hope to entice any of the others away from Gerry. He decided on a surprise attack.

"Well?" whirling on Barrows. "Are you with me or against me?"

Barrows choked. "I beg your pardon, sir, I don't quite—"

"You know damn well what I mean. I'm taking a shot at finding the Lost Continent before Gerry does. If I find it, we're in the money."

Barrows hesitated, but three minutes' vigorous argument persuaded him. Glancing furtively down the metal corridor, he muttered, "Quite against the rules, sir. But if the captain is ordering me—"

"Right! It's an order, then. Pick up the necessary equipment and set a beam. I'll have a plane on the beach in a jiffy."

Barrows had a momentary twinge of conscience.

"What will Miss Carlyle say when she learns you've disobeyed her?"

A beatific expression spread like thin oil over Strike's face.

"Don't worry, Barrows; she'll realize that her remarks were hasty. She'll forgive me," he declared with the unbelievably confident ego of a young man just fallen in love, "because she loves me."

## CHAPTER VI

### The Arkette

The tremendous power plant of a centrifugal flier was impracticable for use in any vehicle so small as an airplane; rocket fuels were wasteful and expensive. So the Carlyle party always carried two small ethyl-driven planes for scouting on planets where the atmosphere would support them. It was one of these that Strike trundled out onto the smooth-packed beach from the rear of The Ark.

It resembled the conventional small all-metal transport in all respects save three. First, it had retractable pontoons as well as retractable landing gear so it was at home on land or sea.

Secondly, it had a seventy-two inch gyroscope which developed a static pressure of thirty pounds per horsepower, as compared to maximum propeller efficiency of six static pounds per horsepower.

This, besides saving fuel, gave the plane a top speed approaching 1,000 miles per

hour. And thirdly, a battery of electronic telescopes reproduced on the visual control screen, regardless of the atmosphere's thickness, a miniature shell of visibility, bisected by the horizon and including the sky above and the terrain below the pilot, and everything on either side, for many miles.

Strike had hardly checked gas and instruments when Barrows ran out. There wasn't much equipment: two rifles with a box of hypodermic bullets, anti-gravity outfit, tiny acousticon receivers for each man to slip into one ear so as to keep on the radio beam, a cathode-gun for emergencies, Strike's heat-beam pistol, and portable telescope.

As Barrows started to step inside, the tail of the plane created a diversion by slowly sliding about in a half circle on the beach. The sub-pilot missed his footing and collapsed in a tangle of equipment.

"Another of those blasted Atlas crabs," Strike swore. "They aren't happy unless they're crawling under something heavy and lifting it."

He sizzled a heat-ray under the tail assembly, and a violet crab scuttled out. It was about the size of a pie plate, weighing perhaps two pounds. Barrows glared.

'How the devil that mauve menace can handle a ton of duralumin is something I'll never know! Begging your pardon, sir."

Strike helped him up, shoved him in with the equipment.

"Not so strange if you remember the Hercules beetle back on Earth. That baby weighs about an ounce, yet can carry five and a half pounds! Figuring the proportionate increase in size, the Atlas crab's accomplishments aren't so miraculous."

Barrows' reply was unintelligible. Presently his head popped into view.

"All shipshape, sir. Shall we take off . Oh. look. What sort of a plague is this?"

Strike turned to see a horde of tiny creatures scurrying from out of the fog-hidden forest. They were fuzzy gray things, about the size of terrestrial rabbits; the resemblance was heightened by the way they hopped, and by the presence of a tuft of white tail. But head and shoulders they looked more like naked monkeys, with wrinkled faces like little old men. Strike grunted.

"Never seen them before? We call 'em duncerabbits. They're migratory. Terrific pests."

The duncerabbits were consumed with friendly curiosity and were already swarming all over the beach; some of the bolder ones were even bouncing right into The Ark.

"Duncerabbits?" Barrows inquired.

"Yeah. Their life-span is about a year, at the end of which they all go crazy."

Barrows looked as if he thought he was being kidded, but was too polite to say so. Strike continued.

"Fact. The microbes of some sort of meningitis-like brain disease are carried about with 'em. Very virulent, and always fatal as soon as it gets to work. The whole race of duncerabbits is wiped out once a year. It's funny in a way – they have fits and go through all sorts of contortions like a circus clown."

"Um. Then how is it the race maintains itself?"

"Oh, they're monotremes. The females lay their eggs shortly before the periodical madness sets in. The young live on the contents of the eggs until large enough to forage for themselves. Orphans, every one!" Strike looked thoughtful a moment, then scooped up three of the little beggars and tossed them into the plane. He followed, "All set?"

Barrows looked uneasily at the guests, but Strike reassured him.

"Don't worry. They can't affect us. I brought 'em because sometimes they're useful. Like homing pigeons; keep 'em in one place a few hours and they'll come right back to it!"

A touch of the starter and the plane's powerful engine burst into muffled thunder. No need for much warm-up in those temperatures, so almost at once Barrows guided the plane down the illimitable beach which unrolled like an endless ribbon from an invisible spool always just out of vision's range. Presently it dropped away, narrowed as it rushed more and more swiftly beneath them, then veered magically away and was replaced by leaden waves. Straight northwest over the Mare Gigantum the stubby Arkette headed, seeking the Lost Continent of Venus.

The three little strangers squalled plaintively in fright. The first one covered his ears at the unfamiliar engine-roar; the second took one look out at the vanishing beach and put his paws over his eyes in panic; the third clapped one paw over his mouth in a ludicrous expression of astonishment. It was too much, even for Strike's surly mood.

"See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil!" yelled Tommy Strike hilariously, and both crew members bellowed with laughter.

Strike always said afterward that the finding of the so-called Lost Continent was anti-climax, they accomplished it so easily. In fact, it gave him an uneasy qualm or

two, almost as if the place deliberately revealed itself to them, enticing them down to some subtle snare.

Barrows was still at the controls after an hour's steady flying, when Strike noticed the curious behavior of some of the instruments.

"That's odd. Must be some sort of radiation nearby. This should mean land."

He was right; it did mean land. Directly ahead, just coming into focus on the visual screen. Barrows throttled down, confused by his erratic instruments, and circled about cautiously. Almost at once he spotted a large level clearing. A rift in the fog allowed him to set the Arkette down easily. And almost at once there came a terrific thunderclap, the sizzling crackle of a bolt of electricity. There was the hiss of molten metal, the smell of ozone.

Barrows and Strike exchanged a startled glance. Ionized air had transmitted to them a partial shock, but both were insulated somewhat by their rubberized Venusian costumes and the rubber floor mat. Strike peered out cautiously.

By the nose of the plane was a curious plant growth, the sole living thing in the entire clearing. It had three parts: there were two upright stems of tough, leathery stuff, one rising on each side of the plane; in between was a large, flat cup oozing a sticky substance from its walls. As Strike watched, the two stems moved slowly about as if seeking a more vulnerable spot. Again the dazzling bolt crashed from one stem to the other, apparently straight through the motor.

"By Jupiter!" Strike exclaimed. "It's an electric plant! The two stems act as poles. It generates juice galvanically, like an electric eel, and shoots its bolt from one pole to the other! Anything it hits naturally drops into the nasty looking cup to be digested forthwith!"

"Yes, sir."

Strike gingerly opened one window.

"Get a load of that smell!" It was a heavy musklike odor-spiced with mint. "Lures things with the smell, probably has a network of sensitive rootlets to register the approach of a victim, then gives 'em the hot seat! Good name for this jigger would be the Circe plant, eh?"

"Very apt name, sir."

"Though you'd think, the plant being grounded, that its charge would all leak away. Must have some way of sealing off its cells before generating the electricity."

"Yes, sir."

Strike turned scowling.

"Damn it, Barrows! Don't sit there yessing me dizzy! Contribute something to the conversation or else shut up!"

"Very well, sir. I suggest we take steps to eliminate the plant before it eliminates us. If it's not too late." Barrows' voice was bitter.

"What d'you mean 'too late'?"

"Just that every electrical instrument on the dash is ruined."

Tommy Strike wasn't the man to bother much about disaster until it actually struck. "So what?" he wanted to know. "Our acousticons are all right. We can just follow the beam back to the ship. We know there're no obstacles sticking out of the sea on our course, to crack up on."

He drew his heat-ray gun and leaned out, careful not to touch any of the metal of the plane, and beamed the electric plant into smoking, twisted extinction. The two clambered out and looked around.

"No wonder this clearing is so large and barren," commented Strike. "Nothing will grow anywhere near a devilish plant like that."

Barrow's conscience, and worry over their situation, had made him nervous. He was anxious to get the business over with. He disappeared into the plane again, reappearing loaded down with equipment. He handed Strike a rifle and hypo cartridges, and the cathode-gun to stick into his waist-band. About his waist he strapped the anti-gravity outfit, and carried by hand the portable electronic Iscope.

"Shall I start the radio, sir? We'll need a beam to travel on."

"Nope." Strike became more genial as action grew imminent. "We'll take a compass just as good as that." He pointed to See-No-Evil, Hear-No-Evil, and Speak-No-Evil, scampering about the plane. "They'll bring us back safe. We used them often at the trading post when they were handy,"

Barrows began to sweat. All his years of training with Gerry Carlyle had drilled deep into his soul the need for every precaution, rigid discipline, strict routine. This casual young man who wandered off into the Venusian mists with nothing but three potentially insane duncerabbits to bring him back was too much.

"But suppose something should happen to them, sir. What, then?"

"Well, we're still on the beam from The Ark. That'll bring us back to the general



neighborhood of the plane."

"Yes, air, but it's so simple just to start the automatic radio beam. It would ease my mind."

"If you must know, Barrows, someone thoughtfully removed the tubes from the radio before we left. I have my suspicions about that. But in any case, it's a total loss now. So let's get going. I certainly don't want to get caught out here at night."

"Very good, sir."

They moved off through the thickly sluggish fog, with all its weird smells and sly noises, in the peculiar sliding gait of the experienced Venusian traveler that keeps the feet from driving very hard into the spongy earth. At the edge of the clearing a lizard scuttled past them into the scant undergrowth. It was an ordinary Venusian lizard in most respects, except that there were two of him, joined together like Siamese twins. Strike stared.

"Say! Did you see that? A freak. Might be worth taking back as a curiosity." He poked the rifle barrel into a clump of bushes. Instantly a whole horde of the scaly things rushed out in all directions. The whole lot of them were twins, joined! The dumfounded Strike forgot to catch any.

"Well, I'm damned. A race of twin lizards! We must have a few of those, Barrows. Keep an eye out for another batch!"

They pushed on, making careful observations through the portable 'scope. When they ran across a baby shovelmouth feeding, it was not one, but two of them, identical in appearance and markings. The land-crabs all moved in pairs, frequently joined shell to shell by a chitinous bridge. Even the occasional trees and shrubs grew two by two.

Strike soon saw the light.

"It's a dual world!" he breathed in awe. "Everything here is born twins!"

"I've been thinking about that, sir," the sub-pilot answered thoughtfully. "Remember how funny the instruments acted before we landed? A radiation of some kind, you thought. Why not one that affects the egg-cell, causing it to divide, or affecting the genes to cause the division, to produce twins?"

"You've guessed it. Earthly scientists have done it in the labs. Why shouldn't it occur in nature? In fact—"

Strike stopped, eyes narrowed at a pair of slim, rubbery trees a few feet away. Normally they stood about fifteen feet high. But—"

The young space explorer hesitated for a moment.

"As we've stood here talking, Barrows, one of those trees wrapped about the top of the other and pulled its mate back. Like a slingshot."

He detected a stealthy movement in the skimpy foliage, and suddenly grabbed Barrows' arm. and dragged him back out of danger. There was a creaking, a sharp rustle, and a vicious whip-crack as the rubbery trunk lashed out at them like a catapult. The two men were out of harm's way, but the duncerabbit Hear-No-Evil was struck squarely across the back. Nearly every bone in his little body was broken, and he collapsed like an empty sack on the ground'.

The sling-shot tree moved very deliberately toward its victim, turning like a sunflower, touched the shattered creature delicately like a cat sniffing garbage, then slowly withdrew.

"That was wanton!" Strike said slowly. "Cruel. I don't expect mercy on Venus, but I never yet saw killing up here that wasn't for sake of survival, food or self-defense. This Lost Continent is a nasty place."

But unpleasant place or not, Strike was there to capture a real prize – confound that self-sufficient fiancé of his – and make himself some money. So he detoured around the sling-shot tree and thrust forward into the murk. Within three minutes after leaving The Arkette, they both spotted what they realized would fit every requirement – a specimen spectacular, weird, typical of the Lost Continent, something for which Von Zorn would pay well. It was Barrows who saw it first.

"Mr. Strike," he whispered. "Straight ahead. D'you see what I see?"

Strike peered at the telescope's screen, sucked in his breath in sudden delight.

"Oood Oood!" he murmured. "What is it?"

That was a question Barrows couldn't answer. It was easily one of the strangest animals he had ever seen in five years expeditionary work with Gerry Carlyle. The thing had a perfectly round body some four feet high, and it ran on four legs. But amazingly, it carried eight spare legs. One set of four protruded from the left side of its back at a forty-five degree angle; the other set protruded from the right side at a similar angle. In the center of its head was a mouth surrounded by three eyes forming the points of a triangle. The thing was triplets! No matter how it rolled, or which side was undermost, it would always be upright!

Strike quivered with anticipation. He could see Von Zorn's face when he brought this beauty home. He could see Gerry's face, slightly green, as he showed her his check. He could see –

"Hey! He's moving off. Don't let him get away!" Tommy pumped a shell into the chamber and slogged rapidly through the fog. He and Barrows caught up with their quarry in time to see a strange duel.

It was very brief, over in a few seconds, this contest between the twelve-legged monster and another of the deadly sling-shot trees. As the animal trotted slowly along a dimly marked game trail, there sounded a swish and crack as the tree attacked. But the dodecaped simply allowed himself to be knocked rolling off to one side, came up on another set of legs, and trotted serenely on just beyond the baffled grasp of the tree.

Strike hugged himself in delight; this was marvelous.

"Nature's balance," he hissed. "Everything has its match somewhere—"

"Yes, sir; I know. But he's getting away again. Give it to 'im!"

Strike whipped up the hypo rifle and fired. Twelve-legs whirled, nipped at the wound, then began to gallop heavily away. Barrows and Strike ran after him. In a minute or so the drug began to take effect, and the victim stopped with head hanging, wobbling at the knees.

"Got 'em!" yelled Strike in triumph. But too soon. Twelve-legs rolled over onto another set of legs and started off like a sprinter.

"What!" yammered Strike. "That's impossible. He can't do that!"

"If he's three animals rolled into one," cried Barrows, throwing his own reserve gun to his shoulder, "each part may be more or less separate from the other. So while the drug paralyzes one-third of 'im, it takes longer to penetrate to the other two-thirds."

Barrows fired just as the dodecaped dissolved into the mist. The two men ran ahead and soon caught sight of him again, wavering weakly on very unsteady legs. And for the second time he rolled awkwardly onto his third set of legs and ambled off. Not so vigorously this time: the drug was already beginning to affect the last one-third. Strike finished the job with a final bullet. Twelve-legs lay quietly down to sleep.

It was the work of a moment to slip the anti-gravity bands around him, adjust the power to the exact balance between gravitation and centrifugal force. The captive hung in the air, gently tugging on his leash, like a gigantic potato sprouting weirdly in every direction.

Strike thrashed about in the undergrowth until he found Speak-No-Evil and See-No-Evil, then started back in the general direction of the plane. At once the duncerabbits seemed to understand, and frolicked ahead of the hunters with an

uncanny sense of direction. They had nearly reached the clearing again when Barrows, who was leading, stopped so suddenly that Strike catapulted into him from behind. Twelve-legs also floated, up and gently nudged the two of them.

"What the devil?" Strike wondered.

Barrows pointed with a nervous finger. "It's a man, by Jupiter! It's a man!"

## CHAPTER VII

### The Twin Race

It wasn't a man, as closer inspection revealed. But anything that stands upright on Venus is easily mistaken for human in the eternal misty shroud. And the stranger certainly stood upright; he could scarcely do otherwise with his six legs. They grew at evenly spaced intervals from around his waist, long and slim. Two of them apparently served also as arms, judging from the way he scratched at his rounded abdomen, hanging like a ripe fruit inside the forest of legs.

From the waist down he reminded Strike of an earthly octopus, or a spider. But from the waist up the creature was definitely manlike, with conventional torso, neck, and head.

"That," said Barrows uneasily, "could be a dangerous customer. See those claws, and the armor-plate all over his body, and the fangs!"

"Yes, but look at his face. He's bound to be peaceful because he's a congenital idiot. Just look at the expression!"

Both men stared fascinated at the play of emotion across the thing's countenance. Expressions succeeded each other fleetingly with the rapidity of a motion picture-exhilaration, fear, surprise, anger, boredom, love, and sometimes just plain nothing. Like a ham actor trying to register everything he could in the shortest possible time.

"Apparently he's prey to every emotion in the book," Barrows suggested. "No selectivity. No brains at all."

Strike raised a palm in the universal gesture of friendship.

"Hi, fella," he called tentatively. No result. The stranger was joined by three more of

his kind, and they milled around in aimless curiosity.

Strike tried a few syllables of the native lingo he had learned as a trader in the southern latitudes. No response. Presently the four creatures wandered off haphazardly through the fog. They fought, showed affection, sulked, and pranced in bewildering inconsistency.

After about five minutes of random circling, the four beings suddenly raised their heads simultaneously, stood a moment as if listening intently, then loped off in a straight line. Strike scooped up the two duncerabbits and stuffed them inside his tunic so as not to lose them, and followed. Barrows tagged along perforce.

"Funny how they all decided to go the same direction at once. I didn't hear anything, did you, Strike?"

Strike grunted. This running around in the stifling Venusian atmosphere was making him pant like an ancient steam engine. He was also faintly concerned about getting entirely off the beam from The Ark. Already the steady tone faded down to an intermittent warning note. The duncerabbits might not be infallible, of course, and if they moved further to the side—

Fortunately they did not. The four creatures led them only a short way, stopping soon before a structure with the appearance of a giant bee-hive punctured by numerous entrances. It seemed to be a sort of community igloo built of several individual mud huts joined in a cluster. There were perhaps a store of doorways, and before each opening sat the amazing counterparts of the six-legged morons. They were counterparts in physical structure, that is, but not in mental capacity. For their enormous brain cases and haggard expressions indicated obviously that here were beings whose sole aim in life was to cerebrate. As each of the original four took position beside a different one of the thinkers, Strike saw the; light.

Strike cried out.

"Twins again!" he exclaimed delightedly. "See? Each pair is twins. You can tell if you examine 'em feature by feature. One is entirely emotional. Get it, Barrows? Evolution's greatest experiment. Complete divorce between the intelligence and the emotions, so the former can work unhampered by the vestigial remnants we call emotions! It's what earthly philosophers have dreamed of for centuries!"

"I'm going to dream of it for some time myself. It's a nightmare."

"You don't see the beauty of it, Barrows. Look. The Intellectuals think things out to a perfect conclusion by pure, unadulterated reason, then instruct their emotional-counterparts to carry out their decision. The Emotionals must be the active, executive half of the combination, to be used only when there's work to be done. That's why they're so fully equipped, fang and claw, to do battle. It's their job

to bring food, protect the home, reproduce.

"See? If the Intellectuals decide something ought to be destroyed, they probably tell the Emotionals to generate a lot of hate and go out to do the job. If they reason it's time to mate, they pull out the love stops on the twins, who-er—"

"Yes, but how does this communication take place? I haven't heard an audible syllable yet."

"Telepathic control, of course. If any individuals are more nearly en rapport than others, it's twins."

"Hm-m. It occurs to me we may be a little reckless, Captain. We don't have any idea what's going on in those brains until the action starts. And judging from the head size, some pretty potent thoughts may be boiling around in there."

"I disagree, Barrows. Size doesn't necessarily mean brain-power! Venus is too young to permit any colossus of intellect to be developed yet. After a few more geologic ages, maybe, if the experiment is a success, our friends here will be the cosmic tops. But not now. Look at their – homes. Crude in the extreme. No evidence of mechanical development, or any kind of invention. No weapons, even."

"Because naturally they have no emotional urge to develop. They don't care about progress, or appearance, eh?" Barrows asked.

"Right. I'll wager they wouldn't care whether they lived or died if it weren't for an instinct for self-preservation. They respond only to simple nerve stimuli such as discomfort, weariness, hunger and so on."

"Then what do they think about?"

Strike shrugged.

"Hard to say. Maybe to them the discovery that two plus two is four would be the finding of a great philosophic postulate." He stepped closer and tried his native Venusian on the Intellectuals without result. They simply sat staring at the Earthlings, sad eyed and mute.

"Maybe we're not enough developed for their telepathic efforts," Barrows snickered.

"No-o. It takes either a receptive mind or a mind easily controlled to make telepathic contact. I was wondering if we could take a pair of these along with us. We..."

"Contrary to law, sir. No interference with life having an intelligence over a certain level. Eighth, isn't it?"

"Yeah. You're right this time. Besides, it might stir up a fuss." And the two men stood there, watching the strange tribe of twins, wondering what to do next. That problem was taken from their hands by See-No-Evil and Speak-No-Evil. Annoyed by their confinement in Strike's tunic, they wiggled free and dropped to the ground. In an instant the village erupted in an astounding flurry of activity.

It was like a well-rehearsed bit of continuity, smoothly presented, over in a flash. The duncerabbits scampered about to limber up cramped muscles. The Intellectuals promptly but calmly turned around on unsteady legs and vanished inside their huts, to the last man. The Emotional, momentarily blank-faced, suddenly burst into a hideous cacophony of squalling and yowling.

Fear written in large letters on their faces, they scattered wildly into the shelter of the fog in all directions. The act was completed as the Intellectuals closed the entrances to their abode by swinging into place what appeared to be a shimmering shield of crimson tissue of some sort. The clamor died away to silence.

"Well!" exclaimed Strike. "Would you. get a dish of that!"

Barrows was definitely worried now.

"Yes, sir. Perhaps they're allergic to duncerabbits. But wouldn't we be wise to leave—"

But Strike was already marching up close, examining the doorways of the community house.

"Say, Barrows! This red thing's a gullet. What they have in the door-ways here looks like a tropical fish, only his mouth is wide open all the time. He's as big around as he's long!"

Strike poked and pried and finally learned the secret. The fishlike creature lived on the bacteria colonies and fungus spores that floated in the air, straining them out before passing the air on through the gills. Filling the aperture completely with its bulk, it thus cleaned the air before allowing it to pass into the interior.

"Air-conditioning!" proclaimed Strike. "Venusian style!"

"Yes, sir. Nature's check-and-balance again. I remember my grandmother once told me that her people years ago used to get water from holes in the ground, and they used to drop a pike in these wells so it'd eat all the worms and bugs and keep the water pure.

"Same principle exactly. They hang these domesticated babies in the doorway 'til they get so big they no longer fit. The Intellectuals naturally aren't fitted to cope with

disease, or anything physical-no resistance. And the reason they're so afraid of the duncerabbits is because the little beggars carry with them the seeds of madness. See?"

Strike turned to gesture to Barrows, but saw only the sub-pilot's heels as the latter sprinted wildly away into the fog. Strike glanced about sharply, and saw the entire horde of Emotionals running at him with expressions of indescribable hate and ferocity. The Intellectuals had given the command to destroy.

Strike's heat-beam hissed in a half circle. It had no effect whatsoever. He concentrated the beam to a narrow, stabbing bolt of flame; it barely blackened the flesh of his attackers. Too late he remembered: this was the gun he had used to clean off The Ark. Its charge was almost completely spent! With one motion he stuck the weapon back in his belt and dashed away after Barrows. Sudden death thundered at his heels.

Earth-trained muscles easily out ran the pursuers, and a miracle of good luck led the two hunters straight to the big clearing, despite Barrows' loss of the electronic telescope in his flight. There was no time to stowaway their specimen, so Strike hurriedly fastened lead-rope and antigravity apparatus to the tail-skid.

The weightless dodecaped shouldn't interfere with flying the plane; they could set down safely in the sea and do the job right later on. Quickly Strike scooped up See-No-Evil and Speak-No-Evil, tossed them in the plane. As he reached up to follow, the tail of the plane deliberately crawled away. Strike stumbled and cracked his chin.

"What, again?" Strike risked a hasty look under the tail. "It's that Atlas crab! Probably a stowaway." He yanked the big crustacean out and tossed him into the cabin, too. "I wouldn't leave a mother-in-law in this hellhole!"

Twenty wild-eyed Emotionals poured out of the mist and attacked the plane with an unbridled savagery that made even the hardened Strike gasp. He fired his gun at them again, futilely, then leaped in with Barrows and slammed the door.

With absolute disregard of consequence the creatures ripped viciously at metal and glass with their claws, bit at them with hideous, drooling fangs. The whole plane rocked dangerously from the furious attack.

"Good God, Captain!" quavered Barrows. "Let's get out of here!"

"Right!" Strike turned on the ignition, stepped on the starter. The engine did not start. Again he tried, and again, with no result. Finally he looked at Barrows sideward.

"That damn Circe plant! It probably ruined the wiring and ignition. And we can



hardly step outside to make repairs."

Barrows began to crack.

"Then we-we're finished. No motor, no radio. I knew I shouldn't have disobeyed Miss Carlyle. She's always right. We never should have tried it alone."

Strike simmered.

"Never mind moaning about Gerry. We're a long way from being finished yet. Give me that cathode gun."

He took the cumbersome pistol, lowered one window a slit to slip the barrel through, pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Strike began to curse bitterly. The cathode gun worked with a delicate "electrical trigger." It had been fastened in contact with the metal dashboard when the Circe plant's charge passed through, and the mechanism was blown out.

"Perhaps the hypo rifles—" Barrows suggested without conviction.

"Not a chance. Those hypodermic slugs are made to burst as soon as they enter soft flesh. They'll never penetrate these armor-plated devils." Strike tried, of course, seeking to put his shots in the enemy's eyes. But such marksmanship was impossible under the circumstances.

Barrows' nerves were going rapidly, and his whole body shook in fear. He tried to conceal it in shame, but failed. Strike rallied him.

"Now look, Barrows; don't get the wind up over nothing. Everything's under control. As long as I'm here you don't need to worry."

"I wish The Ark were here. Then we'd have no worries."

"You've just had that organization stuff pounded into you so long you can't believe a man's worth anything alone. I tell you I'm a match for anything this planet has got. Think I've showed all my aces yet? Not by a long shot. Remember my gag with the whiz bangs? You watch."

Barrows' "Yes, sir," was not hearty.

Strike pointed to Speak-No-Evil, who had retreated to the extreme rear of the compartment and was running about in tight little circles as fast as he could go, like a spinning mouse. Presently he fell down quivering and kicking pitifully like an epileptic, bumping his head blindly against the walls as he jerked around.

"Periodic insanity," declared Strike. "I've been hoping for that. Remember what

started this-the Intellectuals' fear of the duncerabbits? Well, suppose we toss Speak-No-Evil into the enemy's camp!"

Barrows nodded slowly. "I see what you mean—"

Strike gently captured the dying little creature, then turned on Barrows sharply. "What's the matter with you? Your lip's bleeding."

"Nothing, sir. I was just thinking. One of us must leave the plane to carry the duncerabbit to the—"

Strike laughed shortly, gazing keenly at this man he had considered a weakling.

"So you were going to make the big, sacrifice, eh? Now, now, Barrows," he chided. "No melodramatics. I meant it when I said you needn't worry with me along. You just watch the old master strut his stuff."

Strike swelled a trifle. He really had a pretty scheme this time. Opening a small trapdoor in the cabin floor, he dropped the stowaway Atlas crab through to the ground. Then he quickly drew in the landing gear until most of the plane's weight rested on the crab's back.

With the trap still open, he thrust his nearly useless heat-gun down and played the weak beam in a half circle behind the crab, forcing it to move in the desired direction, and move the ship along with it. Using the beam to guide the crab, they slowly crossed the clearing and moved into sight of the Intellectuals' community house.

Strike rose, smiling a bit grimly.

"They asked for this! Barrows, waggle the tail a bit to distract our friends' attention." He picked up the duncerabbit, who was too far gone to respond. "This'll hurt you more than it does me, but it's in a good cause. Ready, Barrows?"

It went off like clockwork. Barrows kicked the rudder bar, the Emotionals rushed down to tear the tail surfaces apart. Strike swiftly stepped out, hurled the duncerabbit for a perfect bulls-eye through one of the openings to the domed structure, then retreated to safety.

He became academic.

"D'you know what I figure should happen now?"

Barrows sat with hands pressed between his knees, shivering. "No."

"Well, Speak-No-Evil ought to finish off the Intellectuals. That'll leave the

Emotionals with no brain control. They'll have to try and think for themselves. And when that happens- Ever hear of the case of Oscar, the pig? It happened many years ago. About nineteen-thirty-seven, I think. Some psychologists placed this experimental pig in a position so-he'd have to try and think his way clear. It proved too much, and Oscar had a nervous breakdown and died. See?"

Barrows saw, and they sat quietly waiting.

Their wait was short. In an incredibly short time Speak-No-Evil's virus was spread to the most vulnerable host it could have found on all Venus. With unbelievable virulence it struck, ravaging the physically frail Intellectuals with the speed of a prairie fire. Even Strike was shocked at sight of the bloody horrors that staggered into view from the community house. From every door they came, smeared with straw-colored blood as cerebral hemorrhages opened the cranial arteries.

It was the more terrible because of the utterly blank expression on those gray faces, which should have been registering pain and desperation. Self-preservation drove them blindly into the open; logic bade them flee Speak-No-Evil and his deadly cargo. But in vain. Before they even had time to instruct their emotional twins, they were stricken helpless by the plague, collapsed in an irregular pattern of untidy bundles on the soggy earth.

But Strike's strategy did not produce the expected results. The Emotionals showed no signs of realizing that their tribe was reduced by half. Animated by their mentors' last emotional command-fury and hate and lust for blood-they continued their blindly bitter and senseless assault on the unmoving metal of the plane, hammering and clawing with unabated savagery.

"I guess I was wrong this time," Strike admitted. "I thought surely the twins were in telepathic communications all the time. And when that union was broken, the Emotionals would be like rudderless ships. It's a devil of a time to be finding it out, but it appears Gerry was right again. Not much use saying I'm sorry, Barrows."

"Forget it, Captain. After all, they can't keep it up forever. They're flesh and blood; they'll tire eventually."

Strike shook his head dubiously.

"Rage looses a lot of adrenaline into the system. Angry men are stronger, more enduring, than normally. These playmates of ours won't quit until they drop from exhaustion."

And so it seemed as the attack continued with uncanny lack of diminution. An irregular piece of metal dropped from the roof of the storage compartment, eaten through by an irregular circle of acid. Strike's lips drew down, in amazement.

"Looks like nitric acid, and not poison, in those fangs. Though if bees secrete formic acid, and man secretes HCL, there's no reason why nitric couldn't be secreted." He locked the door between cabin and storage room as the rear of the plane, not having any insulation or soundproofing materials, would be eaten through first. "It's lucky they haven't the brains to know that acid is their best weapon. Perhaps they'll leave when it gets dark. Too cold for 'em."

The sub-pilot fought for composure with every word.

"It's thirty hours before darkness."

The periodic wind had risen again, carrying its deadly freight of wandering bacteria. They were plastering gradually over the surface of the plane. Their acidulous toxins would speed the work of the Emotionals, who were apparently entirely impervious to infection and disease.

Barrows broke out a pair of antiseptic helmets, in case the bacteria should slip through, then sat looking with unseeing eyes at the sign above the control panel:

**"Individuals have no part in this expedition. We are a TEAM!"**

Tommy Strike stared helplessly out on an utterly alien and hostile world, watching it bring all its untamed powers to bear in a terrible plan for his destruction.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Rotifer

'When Gerry Carlyle first learned that Strike had gone out on his own, she simply smiled sadly.

"Von Zorn's been after him. I know it. Von Zorn's cunning; he's sly. But he didn't reckon with Tommy's fundamental good sense. Tommy won't go far: he'll understand I'm right about these things. He'll be back shortly. Besides, I took the radio out of The Arkette just in case. He'll have to return!"

After the passage of three hours and still no Tommy, Gerry chuckled tolerantly.

"Just a touch of pride. He'll show up pretty soon. I know he wouldn't do anything to spite me because," with the incredibly fatuous faith of the young woman in love, "he loves me!"

But when ten hours passed without a sign of the missing duo, Gerry finally felt the brooding sense of impending tragedy. The familiar iron came into Gerry's ' jaw. She crackled an order into the intra-ship communicator. Chief Pilot Michaels, a middle-aged gray eagle of an Englishman with thousands of flying hours to his credit, hurried in.

"That man of mine," snapped Gerry, "has got himself into a jam, I'm afraid. We leave here in thirty minutes. Prepare to take off, Michaels. On the jump, now!"

All was methodical confusion, then. Outstanding hunting parties were called in, a whiff of anesthetic quieted the tumultuous specimens in the holds, equipment was stowed away, a hundred and one details attended to with the efficient precision that marked all Carlyle-trained crews. In much less than the allotted half hour The Ark was ready to take off, her centrifuge whining with leashed power.

The pilot house was cleared save for Michaels and Gerry Carlyle.

"Will you set the course, Miss Carlyle?"

"Straight northwest over the sea. All we can do is follow the general direction of the beam that Barrows set up before he and Tommy left. Surely not even Tommy is fool enough to leave the beam."

"Righto." Michaels switched on the electronic telescope, gently lifted The Ark from the beach. "Might I inquire – d'you have a definite plan for locating the plane, or do we just shoot hit-or-miss?"

Gerry opened a built-in cabinet, brought out and set up a simple-looking apparatus.

"This is a capacity alarm," she said. "The son of one of the Zoo directors invented it. Intended it to be a meteor detector, but I forgot to try it out coming over. It'll have a real test now." She smiled grimly.

There was a single upright metal plate, wired to the grid of an enormous vacuum tube. Several smaller tubes behind the detector tube made the instrument more sensitive. "It works," explained Gerry, "like an electric variable condenser—"

"But I say, it has only one wall. Surely all condensers have two."

"Exactly. Only in this case the second wall is formed by any metallic body which comes within a certain range. When I switch on the current, there'll be a perfect

electronic balance in the vacuum-tube set-up. It will be upset by the approach of any metal, which naturally changes the capacity. Any such change is registered on the dial here, and rings an alarm bell."

"Very ingenious," drawled Michaels. "Especially for Venus, which is poor in metals. Don't worry, Miss Carlyle; we'll find Mr. Strike all right. That's a pretty tough lad to hurt."

"Don't be silly, Michaels. You don't think I look worried, I hope."

Michaels smiled one of his rare smiles.

"No, miss. You don't look worried. But I know." He squeezed her shoulder paternally. "Why don't you lie down and try to relax?"

Gerry's lip quivered just once, then stiffened.

"Familiarity with your captain isn't encouraged here, Michaels. Remember your place, please."

Michaels knew this woman, even better than Strike did. So he simply saluted, nodded, "Righto, Miss Carlyle," and poured power into The Ark's giant centrifuges.

About 800 miles out from the mainland, Michaels noticed a curious misbehavior among some of the instruments. He called Gerry's attention to it. "I daresay there's some sort of radiation hereabouts. Land—"

His voice was drowned by a sudden clamor from the metal-detector alarm. Gerry sprang to the dial; it was jerking wildly.

"Stop the ship!" she cried. "The plane is somewhere close by!"

They both stared eagerly into the telescope's fluorescent screen, while the ship hovered, penetrating the mists.

"Land, all right. Probably the so called Lost Continent." But there was no enthusiasm in Gerry's voice. The Arkette was not in sight.

"I'll change the condenser capacity, shorten the range. Then we'll move slowly in one direction. If there's no response, we return and try another direction, until the alarm registers again. By repeatedly shortening the range, we'll find the plane."

It didn't take long. Methodically casting about in the fog like a hound after a lost scent, they spotted The Arkette. It bore little resemblance to an airplane. Surrounded by a seething mass of strange six-legged furies, pitted and scored and completely broken in toward the rear where acids had eaten deep, splotched from nose to tail

with hundreds of ugly bacteria colonies, it looked like nothing more than a nasty fester spot in the heart of a Venusian morass.

Gerry Carlyle ordered The Ark down, then looked the situation over with iron-nerved calm. The sequence of events was not clear. The Intellectuals were an unrecognizable mess of decay already. Twelve-legs kicked feebly nearby as the drug wore off, bouncing gently around, apparatus dangling. While the Emotionals, tireless as machines, bit by bit were tearing the plane apart.

"They can hardly be alive,' Gerry observed without a quaver. "But get the broadcasting room, Michaels. Have them try to get in touch with the plane. The Arkette has no receiver, so send the message on the beam carrier frequency. They'll pick it up through the acousticon, if—" She swallowed. "Tell Tommy to waggle the elevators if he – if he's alive."

The message was sent, repeatedly. Gerry and every man in the crew watched intently for the answering signal from The Arkette. Minutes passed, and it did not come. It never came.

Sharp lines gradually etched themselves across the clear skin of Gerry's face.

"Well, apparently I've killed the thing I love—" She spoke casually, too casually to deceive Michaels.

"That's rot, Miss Carlyle," he said. "The fault is not—"

Gerry whirled on him, and the chief pilot drew back suddenly embarrassed at the wild grief in her eyes.

"None of your namby-pamby sympathy, Michaels!" she cried. "Tommy wasn't one for tears and soft words. He was a fighter, and if he's gone he'd want a fighter's epitaph. We're going to blast this hellhole back into the sea! Kranz!" she called into the annunciator. "Bring one of the cathode cannon to bear on that mob outside!"

Michaels leaped forward.

"Hold it, Kranz!" he snapped, and turned to his superior. "Wait, Miss Carlyle. They may be alive but unconscious. If you use the cathode cannon, it'll wipe out the plane and everything."

Gerry bit her lip indecisively, almost carried away by her lust for revenge.

"You're right, Mike. Same thing would hold true for the heat-ray, too. Best we could do would be to pick off one every now and then as he stepped back out of line with the plane."

"The paralysis ray?"

"Even worse. It's fatal to humans at very low power. And surely Tommy would have tried the hypo rifle."

"Anesthetic gas?"

"In this wind? Don't run wild, Mike; you're not thinking straight."

Michaels subsided. After momentary silence, Gerry spoke half to herself.

"A decoy would be useless. Because those devils have completely ignored that twelve-legged nightmare bouncing around out there. From the moment we arrived, they haven't been diverted an instant from their assault on the plane. But if something were to attack them-Michaels! Didn't one of the parties bring in some rotifera at the last minute?"

"You mean those Venusian buzzardlike jiggers that eat everything? Yes, Miss."

"Well, why not let one of 'em loose? It'll finish off those things out there and won't injure the plane."

"An excellent idea, Miss, except that I fear even a rotifer would meet his match out there. Look at that armor plating over their bodies. Those claws. And judging from the plane's appearance, they secrete an acid, too. No, although the rotifer will tackle anything within reason, I'm afraid this job's too much."

"Well, we're going to try it, anyhow."

"Righto. But why not provide for defeat in advance?"

"How so?"

"If those beauties are going to eat the rotifer, instead of vice versa, let's give them a real bellyful. Pump the rotifer full of some poison that won't work immediately on the rotifier itself!"

"Mike, you're marvelous!" Gerry turned to the annunciator. "Kranz! Have you heard what we've been saying? Then hop to it. Rout out all the poisons you can find in the stockroom. And hurry!"

In five minutes Kranz' voice came fearfully over the wire.

"Sorry, Captain. No poisons aboard, no lethal drugs. Just medicines."

For an instant it seemed as if someone were about to suffer the wrath of Gerry



Carlyle. But she controlled herself with an effort.

"Of course there's no poison. We catch 'em alive. What use would we have for poisons. But there must be something, something-Medicine! There's gallons of lurninal in the store-room. The standard space-sickness remedy. You know what lurninal does, Mike? Affects strongly the autonomic nervous system, counteracts adrenaline. It destroys emotion. And if emotion is gone, all desire to kill is gone, too! Kranz? You—"

"Coming up, Miss Carlyle," said the annunciator hollowly.

The scheme was quickly put into effect. A huge hypodermic poured charge after charge of lurninal into the giant six-foot dough-gray ball. A gangway was thrust out from one of the rear ports, and the rotifer rolled quietly down. Once free, it paused uncertainly with its forest of stout cilia delicately exploring the air for vibrations. Then unerringly the blind devourer, the scavenger of Venus, rumbled straight toward the tumult that marked the wreck of The Arkette.

Never in all their experience had the crew of The Ark seen a jungle battle carried on with such unbridled and appalling ferocity. The rotifer, though plainly functioning subnormally with so much lurninal inside it, took the initial advantage by virtue of surprise. There was a sharp clashing as the armored Emotionals were struck by the chitinous lorica of the rotifier, and two of the former vanished into the rotifer's vast gullet.

The ruthless attack forced the Emotionals reluctantly to transfer their fury from the plane to the new enemy. When they did so, the conclusion was foregone. A hundred savage claws knifed into the chinks in the rotifer's armor, ripped him apart in a dozen places. Acid seethed on the chitinous covering; being protein, it turned yellow and began to break down slowly. The rotifier fought like a bulldog, never moving backward an inch, but vicious fangs quickly devoured his exposed soft parts. Shortly all that remained were a few scattered chunks of flesh.

The Emotionals, not relaxing in their fantastic fury an instant, returned to the crumbling plane. But perceptibly now they lost enthusiasm for the job. Presently one of them slumped quietly down in the mess and sat with face utterly blank, devoid of expression. Two or three others wandered aimlessly off into the fog.

Emotion, for the time being, had completely left them; their intelligent counterparts were dead. They had no brains, no desires, no impulses of any kind. Their existence was a complete blank, save for simple nerve-responses to pain or heat or cold or hunger and the like.

They stared foolishly at the havoc they had wrought, and drifted away without purpose into the fog.

Gerry led the grim party of men and women from The Ark, but before they had covered half the distance the tangled mass of The Arkette suddenly shook violently and burst apart. A mighty shout went up as two disheveled figures staggered into view. They were dirty, bloodied where questing claws had found a mark, scorched where acids had seared them-but very much alive. Behind them frolicked a fuzzy gray duncerabbit, delirious with joy.

In a devastating rush all the bitterness, the pent-up grief, the self-castigation, the hatred and determination for vengeance, drained away from Gerry's soul and left her weak and gasping with reaction. For one of her rare, brief moments, she was fragile and fearful and trembling for the man she loved.

"Tommy!" she shrieked, and ran headlong into his arms. Strike's antiseptic helmet, which had protected his face from acid as well as infection, fell apart with the shock. He took every possible advantage of the situation, immediately and competently, while the crew stood around grinning. They quizzed and felicitated Barrows, who explained through chattering teeth that they'd been unable to signal as requested because the control wires had been eaten through with acid.

The years of training reasserted themselves, however. Gerry pulled free and turned on her crew.

"Discipline," she remarked frigidly, "must be maintained. You know the rule about leaving the ship during the periodic winds without antiseptic protection. You're all docked two days' pay, including myself. Now get back to the ship at once."

The crew departed in haste.

"As for you," Gerry scanned Strike in disapproval, "you've disobeyed your captain, broken practically every rule we have by going off on an unauthorized trip, insufficiently equipped, without even a radio. You've disrupted the expedition, thrown us off our schedule, very nearly cost us two lives."

Strike nodded. "I deserve your very best tongue lashing. Loose the vials of your contumely."

"This is, no joking matter, Tommy. Look at that plane. A total loss. Do you think even the London Interplanetary Zoo can afford to throw a few thousand away on every expedition just to convince some young hothead he's wrong? No, indeed. That's coming out of your salary."

Strike squirmed. Gerry's clear voice was being heard and enjoyed by the entire crew. She continued with eloquence, cataloguing his sins with devastating point and accuracy.

"And now I want your word of honor that you'll never try a stunt like this again. No

more lone-wolfing?"

"All right, Gerry. But don't yell."

"I'm not yelling. Furthermore, you're working for me only. No more contracts with Von Zorn?"

"So you guessed that?" He sighed a bit. "All right; no more divided loyalties."

"And no more—"

Strike glanced at his watch, miraculously still working, and interrupted. "Time's up, Gerry. I've rated this verbal message, and I've taken it like a little gentleman. I've promised everything you want, but now the lecture is over."

"Oh, is it? Tommy, I've just begun to tell you—"

"Oh, no. You've finished telling me, because I'm about to employ the one sure method I know to stop you." He grinned.

"Oh." Gerry was a little breathless. "Oh, dear, you're going to kiss me, aren't you?"

## **ASSIGNMENT THREE**

### **SATELLITE FIVE**

## **CHAPTER IX**

### **Cacus**

Tommy Strike let out a startled squawk and tried to leap aside. Then suddenly his legs folded limply beneath him, and he fell to the floor.

"Blast it!" he howled at the man behind the desk. "Turn that thing off! You've crippled me for life!"

The man behind the desk was past middle age, with rabbitlike eyes peering through thick lenses. On the desk-top before him rested a lead-gray box, the interior of which contained a bewildering array of weird tunes and coils. There was a portable power

unit, and a Cameralike lens: now focused on Strike's lower body. The man fumbled for the activating switch, snapped it off.

"Oh-so sorry, Mr. Strike. No harm intended. Just checking my-er-apparatus, seeing that it's in working order." Which explained nothing as far as his victim was concerned.

Strike reassured himself that his legs were still sound, then advanced on the older man, who retreated around the desk in alarm with apology very plain on his face.

"I've never struck a man as old as you," Strike said grimly, "but so help me, I've a good notion to clip you down!"

It was at times like these when Tommy Strike was led to wonder, privately, if he had been really bright in allowing Gerry to argue him out of the independence of a trader's life – boring and ill-rewarded as it had often proved to be – to become her second-in-command and the so-called "Captain" of The Ark. Gerry – in one of her rare, very rare, melting moods could certainly wear a fellow down and Tommy had begun to suspect that where Gerry Carlyle was concerned he was sometimes not quite bright – a thought he kept very much to himself. Anyway he had made his bargain- even if it had been when he had been completely dazzled – and he was too stubborn now to admit that he should have waited a little before he mortgaged his future. At any rate-if Gerry thought that he was going to be one of her "yes men," she was very much mistaken.

Just then the office door slid noiselessly open, and all activity was automatically suspended as a young woman entered. One with a mind of her own to judge by her firm chin and high-tempered arch of nostril.

Her presence in the office brought an elusive suggestion of far-away places and unfamiliar, romantic things-a breath of the thin, dry wind that combs the deserts of Mars, a faint memory of the spicy scents that throng Venus' eternal mists.

"Tommy!" Gerry snapped. "That'll be enough! This is the New York office of the London Interplanetary Zoo, and was not designed for brawling. Now what's it all about?"

Strike pointed at the visitor.

"This crazy inventor crashed in here with his box full of junk, acting mysterious and refusing to tell me what it's for. Then all of a sudden he turned the darned thing on me and my legs went out from under me—"

"Oh, my. My, no. Not a crazy inventor. I am Professor Lunde, head of the department of physics at Plymouth University."

"Oh!" There was a wealth of intolerant scorn in Strike's voice, and he glanced significantly at Gerry. Lunde was well known as an overly self-important and doddering old fool many years past his prime. He had contributed nothing to advance physical research for ten years, hanging on at Plymouth by virtue of decades-old triumphs.

But, surprisingly, Gerry nodded.

"Sit down, Professor." Turning to Strike, she explained, "Professor Lunde has been sending me a letter each day for the past week, cryptically reminding me that Rod Shipkey's broadcast tonight would be of interest to me. Very intriguing."

Lunde's checks became shiny red apples. "Er-I must apologize for the melodramatic manner in which your attention was solicited. My assistant's idea, really. Trevelyan is invaluable. Ambitious lad. He felt a woman in your position could not be reached under ordinary circumstances. But my daughter-in-law works for Mr. Shipkey, and, well, we got wind of tonight's broadcast. I'd rather not explain the purpose of my visit until after you've heard Mr. Shipkey, if you please. He's on now."

Strike moved across the room to the television set, careful to keep out of range of Lunde's funny box. He snapped the switch just in time to catch the program highlight.

The image of Rod Shipkey appeared. He spoke with the easy smoothness that characterized this veteran explorer and newsman's delivery.

"...and now for our 'Five-Star Believe-This-If-You-Can of Space.' Around the largest of our planets, Jupiter, a whole host of satellites of varying sizes are slung in their orbits, tied by the invisible cord of gravity. The closest of these-paradoxically known as Satellite Five because it wasn't discovered until after some of the larger ones-is a tiny bit of rock less than two hundred miles in diameter. It circles its primary some 112,600 miles away, hurtling like a cannon-ball around Jupiter in less than twelve hours. Incredible to think there might be anything on that barren and useless ball of stone dangerous or even interesting to Man, lord of the Universe.

"And yet-believe this if you can!-on Satellite Five there is a strange form of life which has defied all efforts to kill or catalogue it. No man has ever set foot on Satellite Five and returned alive!"

"There are three authenticated records of space-masters who, either by choice or force of circumstance, landed their craft on Five. None has ever been heard from again. One of these cases was an expedition especially equipped to take care of itself under any conditions. It was the spaceship and crew of Jan Ebers, famous Dutch hunter of extraterrestrial life-forms, one of the earliest pioneers in that romantic and dangerous business now epitomized by the greatest of them all-our own Gerry

Carlyle.

"What this strange creature, so inimical, may be, we can only conjecture, aided by fragmentary notes of space fairers who passed briefly in proximity to Satellite Five, and by telescopic observations from Io, the next Jovian satellite outward. These give us a curious picture. Four things we can say about it. The thing is somewhat saurian or wormlike in appearance, low on the evolutionary scale. It seems to be of a sluggish nature, which would be natural considering what a limited supply of energy-building food elements there must be on Five. Not more than one has ever been seen at a given time. And-believe this if you can! The monster breathes fire! Literally!"

Gerry and Strike exchanged tolerant smiles. They had seen a lot of incredible things, but a fire-breathing monster would require a good deal of seeing to believe.

"...have precedent for this phenomena," Shipkey was saying, "in classic mythology. Cacus, from Vergil's Aeneid, spouted fire... Here an attendant stepped into view with an artist's conception of Cacus, the half-man, half-beast slain by Hercules.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, time's a-flyin'. Which is just as well, for there's not much more we can say about our mysterious fire-demon, the Cacus. Safe it is to say that Man, with his insatiable curiosity, will not long let this remain a mystery. Someone with courage and the proper facilities will dare death once again, and tear out the black heart of the secret that shrouds Satellite Five. Indeed, it's a surprise to me that the inimitable Carlyle has not already done so. Can it possibly be that at last there's something in the Universe that blonde dare-devil hesitates to tackle? Believe that, ladies and gentlemen, if you can!"

The too-handsome announcer with his too-suave voice slipped deftly into focus, saying dulcetly, "This is WZQZ, bringing you Rod Shipkey with the compliments of Tootsie-Tonic, that gentle—" The screen went dead.

Strike looked across at Gerry in surprise.

"I bought one of those gadgets yesterday that automatically turns off the radio when the commercials begin," she explained. "All right, Professor Lunde. We've played ball with you. We've granted you an interview, listened to Shipkey. Now let's have a look at a brass tack or two."

Lunde hitched himself forward earnestly.

"I have invented a weapon, Miss Carlyle, that will render the monster on Satellite Five helpless!" he proclaimed dramatically. "A paralysis ray!"

Gerry was dubious. She had seen abortive attempts at paralysis rays before.

"What's the principle?" she asked.

Lunde removed his glasses and used them to tap his fingers and gesture with as he broke into a classroom lecture.

"The transmission of a nerve impulse along the nerve fiber is provided by local electrical currents within the fiber itself. But the transmission of a state of activity from one nerve fiber to another, as happens in the brain when sense organs are stimulated, or from a nerve fiber to a muscle fiber, as happens in voluntary movement, means transmission of excitation from one cell to another.

"Passage over the junction point between cells is effected by a chemical transmitter, acetylcholine. Every voluntary or involuntary movement is accompanied by the production of minute amounts of acetylcholine at the ends of nerve fibers, and it is through this chemical agent that the muscle is set into action."

Tommy Strike stirred.

"Old stuff, Doc. Sir Henry Dale and Professor Otto Loewi won the Nobel Prize for physiology and medicine for that discovery sixty-seventy years ago. Nineteen-thirty-six, wasn't it?"

Lunde seemed vaguely annoyed by this display of erudition.

"Well!" Professor Lunde was resuming. "The acetylcholine is very unstable, and breaks down into other chemicals as soon as its function is completed. There is a disease known as myasthenia gravis, characterized by muscle weakness, in which there is too-rapid destruction of acetylcholine. Now, if a device could be built which would decompose acetylcholine as fast as it is produced within the body-you see? The muscles would be unable to receive nerve impulses, unable to act. Paralysis!"

Lunde now exposed the interior of the leaden-colored box which had caused Strike such distress earlier. The interior showed a bewildering array of tubes and coils, all in miniature; there was also a portable power unit attached. The lens was shutterlike, similar to a camera lens. It appeared extremely simple to operate.

"This, in effect," went on Professor Lunde in lecture style, "produces a neutron stream. We decided against a stream of electrons, because they lack sufficient momentum; protons, too, can be deflected. But neutrons react with atoms at low energies. And the penetrating neutron blast destroys the acetylcholine by adding to its atomic structure, thus making it so extremely unstable that it breaks itself up at once. It does not harm blood or lymph or bodily tissues because they are essentially stable combinations, whereas acetylcholine is not."

"Say! That makes sense! And I can testify the blasted outfit sure works! That means we can take a crack at this Cacus jigger on Satellite Five and show Shipkey

up for a dope! How about it, Gerry? Let's go!"

Gerry shook her head.

"Impossible, Tommy, and you know it. I have lecture commitments three weeks ahead, conferences with Kent on the autobiography, business appointments, a hundred and one things to do. No, the Jupiter trip'll have to wait. Sorry, Tommy. . . ." Then Gerry's voice turned poisonously sweet. "Besides, I have to run up to Hollywood on the Moon day after tomorrow. Special occasion at the Silver Spacesuit. Henri, the maitre d'hotel, is naming a sandwich after me. A double-decker: hardboiled egg and ham!"

"Yow!" Strike convulsed with delight, with one wary eye on Gerry as if half expecting a missile. "That's good. Y'know whose idea that is?"

"Certainly. Nine Planets Pictures runs the Moon as they please, and this is that chimpanzee Von Zorn's idea of humor. He put Henri up to it. But boy-will I make a speech that'll singe his ears!"

But Tommy wasn't to be put off by changing the subject; he was like a small boy at prospect of a fishing trip. "All right; you can't go. But nobody wants to take my picture or get my autograph. I'm not tied down here. Besides, I'm sick of sitting around. There isn't a reason in the world why I couldn't round up the crew and take The Ark myself!"

"I remember the last time you started out alone! On Venus. Remember the lost continent?"

Tommy Strike brushed that aside.

"That was different. This'll be a cinch with The Ark's equipment and Lunde's ray and all the gang—"

"Well—" Gerry was weakening. "Might be arranged. Before we decide on anything definitely, though, there're three things I'd like to ask Professor Lunde."

"Yes, Miss Carlyle?"

"First, have you tried your ray on extra-terrestrial animals?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. The curator of the local zoo permitted experiments on several Martian and Venusian specimens. All creatures of our Universe, it seems, transmit nerve impulses with the aid of acetylcholine. Provided this-this Cacus is not a vegetable, I'm sure the ray will work on him, too."

"All right. Secondly, what's in this for you? Not money. Even if we found the ray



practicable, you couldn't manufacture it for general distribution because your only market would be hunters like myself who wish to capture live specimens."

Lunde put on a vague dignity.

"Prestige, miss, is my sole motive. Prestige for Plymouth University and its faculty."

"I see. And now tell me who put you up to this?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean whose idea was it to write me notes about the Shipkey broadcast and so on? You're just not the type."

"Er-no. Not entirely my idea. Trevelyan's, really. He's my assistant, or did I tell you that before? Smart lad—"

"Very well, Professor Lunde." Gerry cut the interview off abruptly. "You've been very entertaining. My secretary'll give you a written authorization to install your apparatus in The Ark. We may be able to give it a trial."

As soon as Lunde had left Gerry immediately snapped open a circuit on the inter-office communicator.

"Barney Galt? You and your partner come right in."

Two men promptly entered through another door. Galt was tall and lean with a face like a good-natured chow dog. His partner was a nondescript man of middle age. Both were old-time policemen, retired from public duty to act as private investigators for Gerry Carlyle. She wasn't a woman to bother with bodyguards, but a woman in her position is besieged with all sorts of threats, rackets, fraudulent charities and fantastic schemes; Galt invariably discovered the good among the bad.

"Fellow named Lunde just left here, a little gray-haired chap with a bundle under his arm. Follow him, make a complete check. Don't interfere with anything he may do; just report anything phony."

The two detectives saluted casually and left on their unobtrusive mission. Strike snorted.

"Why set those bloodhounds on Lunde's tail? He's all right. A bit of an old fool who has stumbled on something good, but too dumb to be anything but honest."

"Just routine, Tommy. I don't think there's anything wrong with Lunde. Just a hunch. If he gets a clean bill of health, you can take The Ark and go."

"Woman's intuition again?" Strike spoke with tolerant condescension.

"So what if it is? Tommy, I take lots more precautions than this when I sign the lowliest member of my crew for a dangerous expedition. No doubt Lunde is all he appears, and I know you can take care of yourself, but you can't blame me for wanting to make sure when it concerns the man I love."

They grinned at each other.

"Okay, fluff. Snoop around while I rout the crew out of their sinful pleasures and provision the ship. That'll take several hours; you'll know by then everything's on the up and up. Call me as soon as Galt okays Lunde, because Jupiter's nearing conjunction and I want to take off as soon as possible. Bye."

## CHAPTER X

### Flight of The Ark

Events marched swiftly on their silent feet, moving inevitably into place in the strange pattern that spelt disaster. Tommy Strike was busy over radio and telephone, giving forth the rallying cry that brought the seasoned veterans of The Ark rushing from all corners, dropping unfinished business or pleasures at once to get to the spaceport in time to blast off on another adventurous journey. They'd tell you, those tough space-hounds, that Gerry Carlyle's expeditions were nothing but iron discipline and hardships with sudden death waiting to pounce on the unwary; but you couldn't bribe one of them with love or money to give up his berth on the famous ship.

At the landing field itself, under the blazing carbon dioxide lamps, a small man drove up in a surface car, showed an authorization to the guard, passed into the burglar-proof enclosure. He carried a bundle to The Ark, again showed his pass, and went inside. He came out before long empty-handed.

Gerry Carlyle worked without cessation in her office, while outside the city's lights went out one by one, and the muted torrent of traffic in the canyons of the city street grew thinner and thinner, dwindling away to trickles. Presently a light flashed above the door to the outer office. Someone wanted admittance. Gerry slid a heat-ray pistol into plain sight, then tripped the foot-switch which unlocked the door.

"Come in!" she cried.

It was Barney Galt. One hand bulged suggestively in his coat pocket. Before him, registering bewildered indignation, walked a short, stocky chap of about thirty, with bold, dark eyes. He strode aggressively up to Gerry.

"I demand to know the meaning of this outrage!" he said. "Your-your hireling here has held me up at the point of a gun, without authority, and forced me to come to this office against my will. That's abduction, and I'll see this gangster go to the disintegrator chamber for it!"

Gerry looked questioningly at Galt, who grinned faintly.

"My buddy's still on Lunde's tail. We split when we seen this monkey come out o' the prof's place. He's the assistant, Trevelyan, an' he looks an awful lot like a bird we picked up ten-fifteen years ago for delinquency." Galt was famous for his memory. "Anyhow, he took the stuff to The Ark and installed it. Left instructions on how to work it, then beat it. I had the spaceport guards hang onto him while I sniffed around. Miss Carlyle, the junk he put into The Ark wouldn't paralyze a beetle! It's fake! I tried it!"

Trevelyan sneered.

"You just couldn't puzzle out how to work it, that's all. I demonstrated it to a couple of the crew there. They'll tell you it was left in perfect shape. I demand—"

"Shut up, you." Gerry's voice was like a mallet. The paralysis ray had been extremely simple to operate; Galt could have managed it easily. Gerry remembered her vague suspicions at Lunde's carefully arranged build-up, how he insisted on a certain order of events, Shipkey's broadcast first, then his apparatus, all designed to intrigue her interest.

It now seemed rehearsed, a routine entirely foreign to Lunde's vacillating character. And there had been the misty figure of the assistant in the background, "clever" and "ambitious" Trevelyan, the motivating force behind the innocuous Professor Lunde. There was something off-color here.

"Then you wouldn't mind if we went back, picked up Lunde, and tried the apparatus again?"

Trevelyan shifted uneasily.

"Why not? Of course, the assembly is delicate, and the ray machine can easily be jarred out of kilter."

"So that's what you did! After the test, you knocked one of the parts haywire so your superior would be blamed for sending people out to risk their lives with apparatus so delicately and unsubstantially built that it won't even last through an

ordinary testing. Why?"

"You're crazy, lady! I didn't do anything! I just installed the stuff Lunde told me to install. If it's broken down already, that's not my fault!" He suddenly twisted free of Galt's grip. "I insist you allow me to go, or else suffer the consequences before the law!"

Silence, then, while Gerry pondered. Finally she looked at Galt.

"Well, Barney, what does your detective instinct dictate?"

Galt laughed shortly.

"Police methods ain't changed much in fifty years, Miss Carlyle. When we used t' want to find out things in a hurry, we persuaded people t' tell us."

"You mean scopolamine-the truth serum?"

"No, ma'am. That ain't always reliable. We used to use a rubber hose 'cause it didn't leave no marks. Science has give us gadgets like the psycho-probe that beat the old hose all hollow. They don't leave no marks, either, but they sure get the truth out of a man."

Trevelyan's eyes held a horrified look of dawning comprehension.

"You can't third-degree me"" he shouted. "It's unlawful! I won't—"

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

"Okay by you, Miss Carlyle?"

Gerry nodded. She was a woman who had lived with blood and death and wasn't the one to quail before a little necessary brutality. When there might be lives at stake, the lives of her own men, she could be as Hard as any man.

"Shoot the works, Barney. We'll use the back office. The walls are Vacuum-Brik with mineral fluff insulation, so we won't disturb anyone. And don't worry about the law. If anything happens, all the influence of the London Interplanetary Zoo will back you up."

Galt grinned ominously at the trembling Trevelyan.

"My buddy'll have a hemorrhage when he finds out what he missed!" And they grimly forced Trevelyan into the tiny inner room, locked the door behind.

It was mid-morning when those three staggered out of that little black chamber. Galt

and Gerry Carlyle were drawn and haggard, red-eyed from lack of sleep, grim-faced from the things they had had to do to break Trevelyan down. Trevelyan himself could scarcely stand. There was not a mark on his body; physically he was unharmed. Trevelyan had been a tough nut to crack, but Galt had done it. They had the story. The end had justified the means.

It wasn't a pleasant tale to hear—a recounting of ugly passion, jealousy, treachery, hate. Under the American university system, for fifty years increasingly the centers of ultra-conservatism and reactionary tendencies, Trevelyan, in common with many underlings, had had no chance to express his own theories or receive credit for his own calculations and inventions. The silly and unjust ruling that required all papers to be published—and all discoveries to be announced—by the department heads only, regardless of who in the department might have been responsible, had stifled Trevelyan's restless soul too long. He couldn't stand by and see fools like Lunde take credit for scientific advances with which they had nothing to do. It galled him.

So he had planned to discredit Lunde completely, have him ousted, and take what he felt was his rightful place as professor of physics at Plymouth University. If someone as famous as Gerry Carlyle tried out a Lunde "invention" and found it a failure, with probable loss of life, public indignation would ruin him. Then Trevelyan, turning up with the genuine paralysis ray and a story of Lunde's blind stupidity and the fact that he had refused to take advice from subordinates, would easily ride into office. So he had egged the professor, into saddling Gerry with the paralysis ray.

The only thing Trevelyan didn't foresee was meeting an old-time copper like Barney Galt, who wouldn't hesitate to go any length to wrest the truth from a man he suspected.

Gerry picked up a visiphone and called the space-port.

"Put Mr. Strike on, please," she asked the attendant who appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Strike, miss? I'm sorry. He left with The Ark for Jupiter at eight o'clock this morning."

"For Jupiter!" she cried. "That's impossible. He promised to wait until I okayed everything!"

"Well, miss, Mr. Strike and the crew were all ready to leave several hours ago. He became impatient and tried to get in touch with you two or three times. Finally I heard him say everything must be all right and you'd gone home to bed, and anyhow he wasn't going to wait while some er—"

"I know. 'While some woman spoiled his fun.' Go on from there."

"Uh—exactly, miss. While some woman stalled around thinking up excuses to spoil

the trip. And off he went." The attendant's face twisted slightly but remained heroically stolid.

"All right. Don't stand there like a dummy!" Gerry snapped. "Plug me into the radio communications bureau!" Once the connection was made, she told the operator to get in touch with The Ark at once. Minutes passed. At intervals the operator cut in to say,

"Sorry, Miss Carlyle. The Ark does not answer. We'll keep trying."

After ten minutes of this, Gerry suggested they call some other ship nearby and have her contact The Ark.

"We've already done so, Miss Carlyle. The Martian freighter Phobos is in the same sector as The Ark. The Phobos' signals are not answered, either."

Gerry hung up abruptly as comprehension dawned on her.

"That louse Trevelyan!" she cried aloud, wishing momentarily Galt hadn't taken the fellow away so she'd have something more satisfying than the desk to pound. "He wrecked the radio receiver, too. If Tommy tests the ray apparatus before reaching Jupiter, that reckless guy will be so far along on the trip that he won't want to come back."

Quickly Gerry got busy on the phone, calling the major spaceports of the Earth, asking the same question over and over:

"When does your next ship leave for the vicinity of Jupiter?"

Luck was against her. Every passenger clipper in service was either out along the spaceways or undergoing repairs. Frantically, then, Gerry got in touch with those private concerns that had ships comparable in speed and power to The Ark. There were only a few—one or two utility companies, the big exploitation concerns. Again she failed. Sudden fear loosed ice in her veins. The fact had to be faced: nowhere on Earth was there a ship available to overtake Tommy.

Gerry wasted no tears over spilt milk. She did the next best thing, buying passage at a fabulous price on a fast freighter leaving for Ganymede within the hour. She barely had time to see Lunde and explain what had happened, bully him into parting with the only remaining model of the paralysis ray – a miniature low-power set for small-scale experimentation – rush to the port in an air-taxi and dash through the freighter's air-lock ten seconds before deadline.

Only when she was safely ensconced in one of the foul-smelling holes these freight lines used for cabins was Gerry able to relax and give vent to a wholehearted blistering of every one and everything connected with this ghastly game.

## CHAPTER XI

### Outpost of Forgotten Men

On Ganymede, fourth satellite outward from Jupiter, is the strangest community in the System, the center, in a way, of the vast mining activities that go on throughout practically every Jovian satellite, except Five, large and small.

It would be impractical for the freighters which periodically bring supplies and take away the accumulated ores and concentrates to make the rounds of each individual satellite, scattered about Jupiter in different positions as they are. So a single base was established on Ganymede. Earth freighters stop only there to leave supplies and equipment; and all shipments are brought to the Ganymede depot by a local transport system.

And the pilots of these local transport ships compose this unique village. Not ordinary pilots, these men and women, but the toughest, most bard-bitten crew of rocket-busters who ever spat into the teeth of Death herself. Gutter scrapings, many of them, society's outcasts-men with ugly blots on their records such as drunkenness on duty that cost the lives of passengers-criminals, murderers.

There is a reason for this: the job these people do requires that they take their lives in their hands every time they leave the rocky soil of Ganymede. The terrible iron fingers of Jupiter's gravity threaten every instant to drag their puny ships down, down, to plummet into the heart of that pseudo-sun. Great magnetic storms tower high above the limits of Jovian atmosphere, the slightest breath of which would ruin the firing system of a rocket ship and leave it to spin disabled to destruction. Unrelaxing vigilance and incredible reserves of fuel is the price of survival.

Wages are high here, but none but those who have little to live for consider the job. The law shuts its eye to criminals who take refuge there, because they are doing valuable work. Besides, just as surely as if they had been sentenced in a tribunal of law, they are men and women condemned.

Yet this lonely outpost with its heavy-fisted, bragging, hard-drinking ruffians held Gerry Carlyle's only hope of reaching Strike in time to help him. When, after several restless days and sleepless nights during which the so-called "fast freight" seemed to crawl among the stars, it finally reached Ganymede, Gerry was first out of the ship. The place was unprepossessing, simply a barren landing field pitted and scarred from rocket blasts. The thin air was bitterly cold, and ugly yellow Jupiter-glow

lighted the scene badly.

While the crew unloaded the cargo, Gerry turned to a young under-officer.

"Looks like this place was wiped out by the plague. Where is everyone?"

The officer smiled.

"Pretty self-important bunch, these bums. Act as if they were lords of creation and us ordinary mortals are only born to cater to their vanity. Here come a few of them now."

There was a cluster of three or four barracks in the near distance. Out of the most pretentious of them, a half dozen sauntered casually. They were hard-faced, dressed in furs.

The officer met them halfway.

"Got a passenger for you this time. Wants to see your chief."

One of the pilots, a huge hulk of a fellow, grinned.

"You don't say! We ain't got any chief. We're all equals here; everybody's just as good as everybody else."

The freighter officer bit his lip indecisively, but before he could speak, Gerry's temper slipped its leash a trifle.

"Nonsense!" she cried sharply. "A blind man could see that you and this bunch of down-at-heel underlings aren't equal to anything. You must have a leader, someone to tell you what to do. Without a chief you wouldn't know enough to come in out of a meteor shower!"

There was dumfounded silence as the pilots all gathered close for a good view of this phenomenon.

"Well, split my rocket-tubes if I ain't seen her on the news!" one woman exploded.

"I'm Gerry Carlyle," she announced imperiously, "and I'm in a very great hurry. I insist upon seeing your chief at once!"

The giant opened his mouth to bellow in Gerry's face, but something changed his mind at the last instant. He shut his mouth, scratched his chin in bewilderment.

"Maybe we better let Frenchy figure this one out," one of the others suggested.



There was general assent, and the party moved across the field to the pilots' living quarters. A blast of warm air struck their faces as the door opened, and everyone shucked off his furs. There were four more women and men inside and one of them, a man with black spade beard and dark, flashing eyes, was obviously French.

"Hey, Frenchy, there was a passenger landed today," the big man said.

The Frenchman was busy with something in his hands and did not look up.

"So, my good Bullwer? And this passenger, what is it that he wishes?"

"Wants to see our chief. Ain't that a laugh?" Bullwer looked around and saw it was no laugh. It was obvious everyone in that room accepted the mild-looking little Frenchman as nominal leader.

The latter looked up, handling Bullwer with his eyes. "So you bring this passenger to see Louis Duval, is it not?" Bullwer squirmed.

"Okay. No need to get sore. The passenger's here, but it's just a dame."

Duval looked around, startled, saw Gerry. For a moment of breathless silence he stared as if it had been given to him to see a vision. Then he sprang to his feet.

"A dame, yes!" he breathed. "But a dame of the most magnificent, is it not? Louis Duval, Mademoiselle, at your service!" And he bowed low over Gerry's hand.

Suddenly Duval glared about him.

"Swine!" he roared. "Take off your hats! A chair for the lady! Refreshments! Vite! Vite!"

But Gerry was not to be swerved from her purpose.

"Monsieur Duval," she said tensely, "I'm here for a reason. Every minute that passes may mean the difference between life and death to many men. I must, at the earliest possible moment, get to Satellite Five. The only men and women in the System with the courage and skill to get me there in time are right in this room. Will you aid me?"

The pilots, who had lounged about in interested silence while Duval held the floor, now burst into concerted, ironic laughter.

"The dame don't want much," one said. "Just a mass suicide!"

"Satellite Five!" ejaculated a second. "There ain't two dozen ships in the System could make Five. And they ain't none of em anywheres near this dump of a Ganymede!"

Duval's eyes darkened with genuine regret.

"Mademoiselle," he declared earnestly, "there is nothing on this world or any world we would not do for you gladly-if it can be done. But the journey to Satellite Five-it is not possible."

He took Gerry gently by the arm, led her to a window.

"Look. There is one of the vehicles so splendid in which we make our trips regular to the other satellites."

Gerry stared. The ship was an ancient iron hull. Its rocket exhausts were badly corroded; the plates were warped and buckled, roughened by the relentless pelting of thousands of wandering meteorites. A far cry from The Ark's streamlined power which would take it anywhere in the System.

"That wreck!" Gerry ejaculated. "Why that's a condemned crate if I ever saw one! That thing wouldn't last thirty minutes in space! It'd fall apart!"

"Frequently they do fall apart, Mademoiselle. For example, Scoffino is two days overdue from Io. Soon we will drink the toast."

Gerry's eyes followed Duval's to a shelf which ran across the rear of the room. On it were ranged a row of shattered goblets; etched in acid across each was a name.

"Great heavens!" Gerry was indignant. "That's criminal!"

"But no one can blame the company. They would be very foolish to risk ships valuable, costing many thousands of dollars, on these routes hazardous. Besides, there is genius— I, Duval, admit it-among the mechanics. They continue to patch and to patch and somehow most of us we manage to return alive with our cargoes. But to journey to Five—" Duval hunched his shoulders in the inimitable shrug with which a Frenchman can express so little or so much.

Something rose suddenly in Gerry's throat, chokingly. Was it to be failure this time? And what about Tommy Strike, facing some alien horror with empty weapons? He was so quixotically reckless that he would never consent to turn tail and flee, even when his own life was in danger. Was he, too, to die with succor so near at hand because she couldn't dig up transportation to bridge a little gap of a few hundred thousand miles of space?

Not while the strongest in Gerry's arsenal of weapons was yet unused. She had a hypodermic tongue, and the knack of injecting caustic, rankling remarks. She whirled on the group of lounging pilots, fire in her eye.

"That's a laugh!" she cried in piercing tones. "That's a real laugh! My fiancé is down there on Satellite Five right now, fighting it out with some monstrous thing no man has ever seen 'to tell of. There's nothing the matter with his insides; he's got what it takes. But because of a scheming rat back in New York, he's out there defenseless with a weapon that won't work. I have the real one, and I came to the only place in the entire System where I could find men and women supposedly with the skill and guts to pilot me to Satellite Five.

"And what do I find? A bunch of no-good tramps, half-baked defeatists playing cribbage for matches! Telling each other how tough they really are, living perpetually in the shadow of death! Dramatizing themselves! Breaking a two-bit goblet every time one of their worthless carcasses takes a dive into Jupiter-the cheapest kind of theatrics! If the whole lot of you were laid end to end, it would be a darned good job! All told, you couldn't muster up the courage of a sick rabbit!"

It was a cruel, bitter indictment, completely unjust; but it was the last trump in Gerry's hand. If it failed to take the trick, she was through. With a final sweeping glance of unutterable scorn, she strode out of the barracks and slammed the door behind her.

There was thick silence in the pilots' quarters after Gerry left, broken finally by sheepish stirrings and a muttered, "Whew!"

Of all the people gathered there, Gerry's denunciation affected Duval most poignantly. He had all the Frenchman's traditional romanticism and chivalry and love of beauty. For three seemingly endless years he had been a lonely exile on Ganymede, far from the beloved Gascony of his birth.

Paris was a dim memory; he had not seen a cultured woman in years.

All the ideals in his romantic soul had become magnified to an unnatural extent. Despite the fact that he dominated this hardy crew, he was a misfit. By nature he was cut out to be a reincarnation of the chevalier Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*; cruel circumstance had made him – what he was. And now this flame of a young woman had poured salt on his wounds. Boy and girl in love, and in need. It meant everything such a situation means to any Frenchman, a hundred times keener. And he with opportunity to make his worthless life meaningful again.

Purposefully Duval strode to a cupboard, yanked out a handful of charts, pored over them. He sat down with pencil and calculator, muttering to himself, figuring.

"Name of a pipe," he whispered presently. "It might be done."

Duval hurried out after Gerry and found her by the freighter, which was now taking on its load of ore concentrates, trying bitterly and hopelessly to argue its commander into attempting to make Satellite Five.

"Mademoiselle!" called Duval breathlessly. "Mademoiselle, I believe there is a possibility of the faintest—"

"Duval!" Gerry cried, her face lighting like a torch from within. "You mean you'll try it? Oh, that's marvelous! And I'll see you're properly rewarded, too. I have influence. Plenty. I don't know what you did back home, but if it can be fixed—"

Duval brushed this aside.

"We have perhaps one chance in the hundred to arrive safely. After that is time to talk of the rewarding. Fortunately, the Satellite Five is almost directly opposite Ganymede, on the other side of Jupiter—"

They were moving rapidly across the field tarmac toward the battered rocket ship in its starting cradle, Duval's feet fairly twinkling to match Gerry's eager strides. The paralysis ray swung at her side. She nodded incisively.

"I see what you mean. We dive straight into the heart of Jupiter to gather terrific momentum, then cut over in a hump and utilize our speed to draw clear and make our objective. Splendid! I knew there must be some rocket-buster around here with the stuff to make this trip."

Duval beamed.

"You are willing to risk the life with me?"

"Perfectly."

Drawn by curiosity, some of the pilots drifted around as Duval made a swift final check-up before taking off. A few, a bit embarrassed by anything like a display of emotion, diffidently shook the Frenchman's hand in a manner clearly indicating they never expected to see him again. Just before they scaled the entrance port, Bullwer poked his head inside.

"Say! You really gonna shoot for V, Frenchy?" he asked incredulously.

Duval drew himself up to every inch of his five feet. "And why not? If there is anyone who can it achieve, I, Duval, am he, is it not?"

Bullwer grinned.

"Maybe so. But I'll lay a week's pay you can't."

"Done!" And Duval slammed the port shut, nearly decapitating Bullwer. Flames spewed from the rocket-tubes in tenuous streamers along the ground; thunder shook

the ship. Scarcely waiting for the motors to warm up properly, Duval poured on the power, and the strangely assorted couple took off on perhaps the most hazardous journey in the history of rocketry.

## CHAPTER XII

### Re-birth

Gerry always remembered that trip with the breathless terror of a nightmare. Once in the ship, there was no time to adjust herself to the danger, none of the usual hours of preparation, of preliminary approach, during which one can screw up courage to the sticking point. Instead, one instant the clang of the port was ringing in her ears, the next, the booming of the engines, and all at once they were dropping like a plummet straight into the maw of the gigantic golden bubble of Jupiter, which burgeoned before them like a mighty blossom of disaster.

Duval was a grim figure strapped in the pilot's seat, his magic hands flying over the control board, delicately probing, guiding the old cracker-box ship miraculously, wary of indications of Jovian magnetic storms which would mean destruction for them. Completely ignoring the physical effects of acceleration, Duval soon had the rocket ship hurtling down at speeds she had never achieved before, and for which she was never built.

Soon the sinister, swirling globe of Jupiter filled every corner of the visi-screen. Duval spoke sharply without turning his head.

"The straps, Mademoiselle! Make certain they are tight! Soon we must make our move!"

Gerry set her teeth grimly, watching with almost impersonal admiration the skill of Duval. Too late to turn back now; already a faint scream was audible as they bulleted through the extreme upper reaches of the Jovian atmosphere. Then Duval's fingers plunged downward on the firing keys, and the underrockets flowered crimson petals of flame.

The ship lurched, groaned hideously in every joint as if in some strange cosmic labor, striving to tear itself free. Instantly the steely fingers of Jupiter's gravity wrenched powerfully at the ancient hull. Seams squealed, ripping open as the rivets sprung; the plates twisted tortuously under the unprecedented strains. Air pressure dropped as the precious mixture whistled out through a dozen tiny vents. The obsolete air-o-stat pumped valiantly in a grim losing battle.

Temperature suddenly rose, rapidly becoming intolerable as the outer air became thicker and friction heated the hull. Sweat poured into Gerry's eyes, but she maintained her stoic calm.

The picture of Jupiter on the visi-screen was shifting erratically; a matter of a few seconds would tell the story. . . .

They made it. Their incredible velocity defeated the greedy powers of Jovian gravity. One final burst in which the rockettube flames burst completely around the ship's nose, obscuring everything, and they had cleared the "hump," missed the surface of Jupiter cleanly and burst through the layers of upper atmosphere into open space again. Ahead, moving round to its assignation with the ship, was Satellite Five, barren and bright in the Jupiter-glow.

The rest was comparatively simple. Jupiter's gravity still had a strong claim on them; it was as if they were chained to the giant planet by a cosmic rubber band, which tightened inexorably the further they coasted away. Handling this mighty force with dexterity, Duval jockeyed the ship so it was barely moving when it reached the appointed spot in space. They came to rest with a jar that completed the wrecking of the ship, but they were safe.

Gerry took Duval's hand and squeezed hard.

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

They piled into space-suits, Gerry seized the paralysis equipment, and the two left the wreckage. There was nothing moving in sight on the fairly level plane, spawled off by Jupiter's fierce heat when the System was young, whose horizon was a scant mile away. So they started walking. Gravitation was surprisingly strong, indicating unusual density. This fact, plus the intense cold which slows down the dance of the atoms, accounted for the fact that Five still retained remnants of an atmosphere.

The hikers even saw traces of water vapor, in form of frost. Occasionally they passed clumps of mossy or lichenous growth. Twice they observed colonies of sluglike creatures growing, reproducing, and dying with amazing rapidity. And then, like an enormous silver cigar looming over the horizon, The Ark came into view. It looked almost as large as the Satellite itself, and there was furious activity going on. A half-dozen suited figures scurried about the nose of The Ark. From the pilot house another figure was throwing out instruments to those below.

Gerry and Duval drew quickly near, and she shouted into her head-set, "Hey. Tommy! Tommy Strike!"

All the moving figures turned sharply, in varying attitudes of astonishment. Then one

of them gestured sharply and came lumbering over the plain as fast as possible.

As the two from Ganymede moved forward, Duval tripped and sprawled ludicrously, though harmlessly, on his face. He scrambled carefully to his feet and bent over to see what had caused his humiliation. He uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Name of a pipe! What a monster of the most incredible!"

Gerry, too, stopped to examine the thing stretched out on the rocky ground. It was something beyond even Gerry's vast experience in extra-terrestrial life. From tip to tip it might have measured as much as twenty feet, and its ugly, warty gray hide was divided into armored sections along its entire length with soft spots between the plates. It was oval-shaped in lateral cross-section, something like a gigantic cut-worm that has been stepped upon but not quite squashed. Duval was for leaving the nauseous horror strictly alone.

Gerry's clinical instinct, however, prompted her to turn it over with her foot. About a fourth of the way along the under side were six short legs, arranged with no particular symmetry, just stuck here and there. Sprouting about the front end of the thing was a forest of what looked like dead gloved fingers-sensory organs of some kind. The mouth parts resembled a funnel, much like the proboscis of the common house-fly. Two eyes set on either side of the head were glazed in death. While the entire lower half of the abdomen was slit wide open; inside was nothing but a sickening mess of half-devoured vitals.

At that moment Tommy Strike finally galloped up, spluttering.

"Gerry! How the dickens did you ever manage to get here? And why? And—"

"Never mind all that!" interrupted Gerry. "Duval here brought me from Ganymede by rocket. He's the greatest pilot in the System. And I came because the paralysis ray equipment you have is no good."

"No kidding!" Strike was bitterly sarcastic. "You came a long ways just to tell us that. We found it out a few hours ago. It cost us two lives. Leeds and Machen are gone, burned to cinders."

"Burned!" Gerry rocked back on her heels, stunned at the loss. "Then this-this Cacus really does breathe fire?"

"And how it does! You've never seen anything like it. But what I want to know is about the ray apparatus. What—"

Gerry quickly explained about Trevelyan's treachery. "I have the genuine article with me now." She displayed Lunde's other model.

Strike seized it avidly.

"Then let me have it! Will we give that monkey what-for!"

"But wait a minute, Tommy. What about this thing here?" She kicked at the empty dead thing at their feet. "Is this the Cacus?"

"Well, it was the Cacus." Strike looked a bit befuddled. "Though now the Cacus has helped itself to The Ark. Just walked in and took over. The pilot-house and engine rooms are locked, keeping it out of there, but the boys trapped in the nose of the ship are jettisoning the valuable stuff in case the Cacus decides to burn its way in there." He swore. "It's a mess!"

Gerry shook her head.

"Then you mean there's more than one Cacus; you killed this one, but another showed up. That it?"

"No, that isn't it! There's only one Cacus. It – it—" Strike stopped and drew a deep breath. He rolled the carcass over on its side and began again. "See that heat-ray burn? Well, here's what happened. When we found the paralysis apparatus on the blink, we were practically here already, so we figured we'd take this freak with our regular equipment. We found it crawling around with little jets of fire occasionally licking out of its mouth or snout or whatever it is. It was burning this mossy junk that grows all over, and also toasting plenty of these snail-like things, and then siphoning them up. Omnivorous.

"Well, the job looked like a cinch, so I creased it across the spine with a heat-ray, just enough to double it up while we doped out a muzzle to cap that fiery mouth. It twisted into a knot, all right, but then the damndest thing happened. The thing split down the middle like an over-ripe fruit and another Cacus popped out almost full-born. The new one spouted a terrific blast of fire at us, and while we ducked out of range, the new Cacus just sat down and made a meal off its mother's – or is it its father's-insides. You could see the creature grow by inches till it got about the size of the original. Then it made for the ship.

"Leeds and Machen were guarding the air-lock, and they gave the second Cacus full-power heat-ray. It never bothered the thing. It just burned the two of 'em to so much charcoal with a single breath and pushed on inside the ship." Strike's mouth twisted bitterly at the memory. "Most of the gang escaped, though a few are still in there, safe behind the emergency bulkheads and with some of the air still preserved. Don't think anyone else was hurt."

The trio hurried toward The Ark.

"So the Cacus is bisexuals" said Gerry wonderingly. "Self-fertilizing. That's



amazing. And only one of them on the whole satellite! That's really amazing."

Strike looked at her queerly.

"You don't grasp the truly amazing part of it-the Cacus' imperviousness to Leeds' and Machen's heat guns. Don't you see, Gerry? When Cacus number one was attacked by the heatray, it promptly transferred all its life and intelligence to the youngster in its womb. But it also transferred the power of unbelievable adaptability, so when Cacus number two was born it was completely defended against that heat-ray forever henceforth.

"It'd be the same for any other weapon we have for capturing an animal alive; it would simply let itself be born again fully adapted and protected. The only way we can stop this monstrosity is by suspending instantly all its vital functions, or by killing it outright."

Gerry thought for a moment. "Well, why worry?" she said finally. "A cathode gun will always do the trick."

"That's just it," said Strike with melancholy triumph. "The door to the arsenal was open when the Cacus entered the ship. Everyone ran out of there in a hurry, and there isn't a cathode gun in the crowd."

Gerry snorted.

"You certainly have a genius for getting into trouble. But it can't be as bad as you say. For one thing, this business about instant adaptability is so much moon-truffle. It's fantastic. Leeds' and Machen's guns simply failed. Or maybe they shot wildly."

Strike expressed unutterable scorn. Gerry Carlyle's crew were all sharpshooters, and they simply never got rattled.

"You'll soon see for yourself," was all he said.

When the three of them approached The Ark, the crew gave a ragged cheer for their famous leader and rallied hopefully around, visibly heartened. Nothing in their experience had ever completely baffled Gerry Carlyle, except the strange case of the Venusian murri, and they had confidence she would get them out of this predicament.

Gerry looked over the familiar faces with relief-Kranz, Barrows, Michaels-most of her veterans were all right.

"Let's find out about this adaptability stuff first of all," she decided. "Anyone got a hypo rifle handy?"

The original hunting party had carried several, and presently one of them cautiously approached the open port of The Ark to act as decoy while Gerry stood within easy range, rifle ready. The decoy peered gingerly inside the ship, passed the two grim chunks of seared flesh and fabric that marked the pyres of two brave men, then finally vanished inside. Minutes dragged by. Then a faint shout rang in the watchers' helmets, and suddenly the man tore out of The Ark as fast as he could run.

Once outside, he gave a tremendous upward leap many feet high, and just cleared a sizzling tongue of hot flame that belched out of the door behind him.

The Cacus, bulgy-eyed and hot-breathed, crouched angrily at the door.

Quickly Gerry drove home three hypodermic bullets in the creature's soft flesh in the crevices between the armor-like coverings. They took quick effect. The Cacus' head drooped sleepily, and it moved uncertainly as if undecided whether to come out or stay in.

Then suddenly a series of hideous abdominal convulsions wracked the thing.

The monster rolled over, still inside the ship; as if an invisible surgeon slit the Cacus open for two-thirds its length, the abdomen parted. Like some strange phoenix of terror, a new Cacus struggled out of the dying body of the old, stood defiantly with the upper half of its body raised on the six legs.

Unerringly and with no sign of nerves, Gerry deliberately emptied the hypodermic rifle into the new Cacus. The creature lowered itself to the metal floor, hunching along like a caterpillar. Then it turned and commenced ravenously to devour the soft inner parts of its host's anatomy.

Jerkily it seemed to increase in size, like a speeded-up motion picture of subaqueous life.

The hypo slugs had absolutely no effect upon it.

Petulantly Gerry slammed the rifle to the ground, where it bounced lightly.

"That's impossible!" she cried. "I've never heard of such a thing before in the entire Solar System!"

"Maybe it got here from some other solar system," Tommy said. "Lord knows how, and isn't native here. But that won't help subduing it."

"Rats! How about anesthetic gas? Any bombs available?"

A dozen were turned up. The Cacus having disappeared from view, Kranz daringly ran up to The Ark, threw several of the bombs in, and shoved the port partly closed.

In less than five minutes the port was nudged wide open again, and the Cacus, ugly and flame-wrapped, glared challengingly at the little group of scattered humans. Everyone saw instantly that the new Cacus was slightly smaller than the one before, and was still growing. The amazing re-birth had defeated the anesthetic gas as well.

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

## **CHAPTER XIII**

### **Duval the Magnificent**

She quickly set up Lunde's model paralysis ray machine. It worked successfully on Kranz, to everyone's amusement, and Gerry advanced on The Ark. Instantly the Cacus, watchfully guarding the port, emitted a tremendous streamer of fire close to the ground, curling up at the end like an enormous prehensile tongue. Gerry marked the limit of that flame and stopped outside it. Aiming the paralysis ray at the Cacus, she flipped the activating switch.

Nothing happened. Gerry fiddled with the lens to no avail. She moved closer, only to be forced to scamper out of range of the breath of fire. Then she remembered. Lunde had told her this was a small-scale model, with less than half the power of the working model. The Cacus out-ranged them; they couldn't get close enough to allow the smaller ray machine to take effect.

The Cacus blew another fiery lance at the crew, as if in derision, then turned at some vibration within the ship and moved into its depths. Abandoning its sluggish mode of crawling, the Cacus coiled and raised its tail over its back much in the manner of the scorpion, and trotted off on its six curious legs in search of some incautious engineer who was seeking, perhaps, to sneak out to safety.

Gerry wore a baffled expression.

"That," she pronounced, "beats me. It looks like stalemate."

"Pardon, mademoiselle. Not stalemate." Everyone turned to look at Duval, who had been completely forgotten in the excitement.

"No?" said Strike. "Then it's a pretty good imitation of stalemate. He can't catch us in the open; we can't do anything to him."

"But, monsieur, every second that passes works in favor of the enemy. Our oxygen

supply grows short. It is a situation of the most desperate. I, Duval, say it."

Immediately, though no one had noticed the mustiness of their air before, every person there gestured toward his throat and fumbled quickly with the oxygen valves. Breathing became consciously shallow, slow. There was no sign of panic among these veterans, but uneasiness was a definite presence among them.

Gerry bit her lip. "Any suggestions, Duval? You've played aces every trick so far."

"Merci bien. Yes, mademoiselle, I have the suggestion to offer. To combat our enemy, it is necessary that we study him, find his points vulnerable, if such he has."

"And how'll you get that monstrosity under your microscope?"

Duval's teeth flashed. "Ah. To study the present Monsieur Cacus, that is not possible. But his ancestors-eh?"

Startled looks were exchanged.

"Say, that's a thought!" Strike cried, and led a rapid trek across the plain to where the carcass of the first Cacus lay disemboweled. While not scientists in the strict sense, all the Carlyle crew had had scientific education and training. Almost at once a remarkable discovery was made by Kranz.

"Captain, will you take a look at this?" He was holding up the dead creature's funnel-shaped mouth, spreading it wide apart with his hands. Instead of true teeth, the entire inner mouth was composed of a sort of flexible horny growth which probably served for mastication when and if necessary. But the extraordinary thing was that every available crevice was veined with a gray, spongy mass.

"That," said Kranz, "is spongy platinum!"

"And say!" someone chimed in impressively. "The whole Satellite must be rank with platinum if there's enough to impregnate the system of any animal life."

Excitement over a possible bonanza discovery stirred them momentarily. Then Duval's ringing voice held them all again.

"Ah! But more important, I believe, it is that we have here the explanation of the breath of fire! One may read in any textbook of chemistry elementary that when hydrogen or coal gas is made to pass over spongy platinum, it makes of fire, is it no? Well! One may also read that anerobic bacteria, acting upon matter of decomposition in swamps, generate methane, which is one of the constituents-as is hydrogen-of coal gas. Now! All the world knows we have in our digestive tracts many bacteria. Surely, Monsieur Cacus, within, contains anerobic bacteria which act on the decaying matter animal and vegetable, of which a decomposition product

must be gas similar to coal gas. Thus the breath of fire!" Duval finished with a flourish.

Everyone agreed: the Frenchman had something there. But how to turn it to advantage? Strike screwed his face up thoughtfully.

"Spongy platinum, then," he groped hesitantly, "is a catalyst—"

Instantly Gerry took him up.

"Of course! A catalyst! And there are several things which, in combination with it, kill its action as a catalytic agent. The halogens, for instance-bromine, flourine. Or hydrogen cyanide—'

Everyone looked at everyone else, eager to advance Gerry's idea, uncertain just how to go about it.

"That's smart brain-work, Gerry," said Strike, "but our supplies might as well be on Sirius for all the good they can do us. Where'll we get any of the things you mentioned?"

"If it pleases you, mademoiselle—" It was Duval again, and hopes soared at the confidence in his voice. "I, Duval, can perhaps solve this problem. You see these blossoms, so tiny, so unimportant?" He toed one of the little groups of close-clinging growths with the colorless, star-shaped blooms. "They are found, I believe, in one species or another, on all the satellites of Jupiter. We know them well. They are related, one might say, to the night-shade of Earth, because they have poison within them. It is, as you have said it, hydrogen cyanide."

Without the necessity of a single command, the crew went to work. Three of them got furiously busy picking great handfuls of the plants which offered them salvation. Another ran back to the prow of The Ark, from which the man in the pilot house had dropped the important instruments, and had him toss out a space-suit helmet; it would make a perfect pot for boiling.

The little remaining drinking water left in the pilot house was also lowered. A pair of low-power heat beams was arranged under a tripod made of three of the useless hypo rifles. In a very few minutes the mixture was bubbling merrily-it came to a boil quickly in the absence of much pressure-brewing a vengeful hell-broth for the Cacus.

By the time it cooled to a scummy liquid with a brown substance deposited from the solution, the whole party was laboring for breath, with the exception of Gerry and Duval, who hadn't been in their space-suits as long as the others.

Gerry peered around the row of blue-lipped faces; what she had to do now was hard. Someone had to be chosen to try conclusions with the Cacus; someone had to

risk his life, perhaps lose it, in a desperate effort to introduce the HCN into the monster's mouth.

True, it had to be done at close range; so why not try the paralysis ray? But Gerry had come to distrust the ray machine, which was the cause of all the trouble. Perhaps it didn't have the proper power even at close range. If a life had to be lost, it would simply be thrown away if the paralysis ray failed to work. But it might do some good if lost while putting into effect Duval's textbook chemistry.

The crew would never under any circumstances allow Gerry to try it, so she was forced to call for volunteers. To the last member, they all stepped forward.

But Tommy Strike stepped farthest, taking the bowl of deadly juice from Gerry's hands.

"My job," he said briefly. "I'm sort of responsible for this mess. It's up to me to straighten things out."

Gerry's eyes misted. She had no right to refuse him. Someone had to go and Strike, as co-captain, had authority to choose himself. And rigid discipline of the Carlyle expeditions insisted on no needless sacrifice of life or limb. Strike would go alone. Gerry needed all her iron control at that moment.

Strike opened one of the meta-glass gas bombs to allow the gas to disperse, then filled it with most of the poison solution, saving a little for a second try in case he failed. With a crooked grin he waved salute and started toward The Ark. Deftly, and before anyone had the slightest inkling of what was happening, Duval slipped up behind Strike, tripped him, and threw him easily to the ground. He caught the meta-glass ball as it floated downward.

Gerry yelled at him.

"Duval! Stop it! You've done enough already, besides, you're not properly one of us at all. Put that down!"

Duval's smile gleamed brightly. "But I have just made a flight impossible from Ganymede to Satellite Five in a scrap heap. Today is my day of luck! I cannot fail!"

"Duval! Come back! We want no quixotic foolishness. If you understood our discipline you'd realize we just don't do things that way."

And Duval of the empty life, whose passing none would mourn, who burned to do heroic things in the grand manner, said soberly:

"And if you, mademoiselle, but understood the French, you would realize that we Gascons do things this way."

And he was gone, running rapidly toward The Ark. Strike floundered finally to his feet, snarling. He seized the paralysis ray model and set out after Duval as fast as he could go. In a flash the entire crew made a concerted rush in the same direction. Only Gerry's savage commands halted them reluctantly.

Duval reached the port, peered cautiously in, then vanish inside. Strike followed him less than a half minute later. Then nothing. The watchers outside listened intently at their helmet earphones, but no word came from either Duval or Strike. They got in touch with those still trapped in the ship, but the latter reported nothing. That was natural, as the lethal game being played between Duval, Strike, and the Cacus was taking place along nearly airless passages where sound would not carry well.

Presently the listeners were shocked to hear a high-pitched squeal like that of a wounded horse coming faintly through the earphones. It was nothing human: it must have been picked up by someone's helmet mike at a point very close to the screamer. At that, all restraint was flung aside and the crew, with Gerry in the lead, pounded pell-mell over the solid terrain and recklessly into The Ark.

They burst in gasping on a climax of terrible ferocity. It was so swift, so savagely sudden, that it was all over before they could throw their feeble powers into the balance.

The Cacus had evidently been prowling down a side passage, and Duval had attracted its attention, then ducked around a corner into the main corridor; when they met, it would be at close quarters where there was no chance for the Frenchman to miss. As the crew tumbled in, Duval was crouching by the passage corner and had just finished yammering at Tommy Strike to stay back and not be a fool. Strike had apparently started in the wrong direction and had just located the real theater of action; he was running purposely along the corridor to back up Duval's play.

And then everything happened at once, like a badly-rehearsed bit of stage continuity in which the actors rush through their parts almost simultaneously.

The Cacus, tail curled up and running on its six legs, skidded furiously into the main corridor of The Ark. At once it spied Duval and emitted another of those hideous shrilling sounds. Duval's arm went back, whipped forward. A glittering arc made a line straight for the ugly, horn-like snout of the beast. Strike, off to one side and several feet behind Duval, dropped to his knees and fumbled with the ray-box. A terrific blast of flame belched out from the Cacus to envelop head and shoulders of the doughty Frenchman.

For a moment it appeared that the fiery stream had caught the container of HCN and demolished it. But no-the Frenchman had been the quicker; he had scored a bull's-eye. By the time the Cacus turned to annihilate Strike, the hydrogen cyanide had entered into combination with the spongy platinum, and nothing but a burst of

gas came forth. From that moment the monster was through. Strike brought the miniature paralysis ray to bear, and instantly the Cacus collapsed in a twitching mound of nauseous flesh.

Cathode guns were brought from the arsenal, and the Cacus was ruthlessly blasted out of existence. Then Gerry and Strike hurried to Duval's side. The Frenchman was terribly burned, his face a blackened, blinded travesty of a man. The spark of life was almost extinguished. But as the two knelt beside him, Duval's cracked lips managed a feeble grin.

"Mademoiselle," he whispered, "will have to collect that wager I have won from the good Bullwer. We made the flight. He has lost a week's pay, that one." Something like a laugh bubbled up from his seared chest.

Gerry groaned in anguish.

"Duval! Oh, you magnificent fool, Duval! Why did you do it? Because of me, you must die. That's wrong—"

"Death?" Duval somehow managed a shrug. "Death, yes. But what a death of the most heroic!" And with supreme courtesy to the last, Duval carefully rolled over to face the wall, that a woman might not have to suffer the unpleasant sight of a dying man.

Somberly, Strike helped Gerry to her feet, and she clung to him tightly. For a while they said no word. All about them throughout the ship came the noises of normal life being resumed. The entrance port clanged shut. Voices rang out. Distantly a generator began to hum. Bulkheads rumbled open again. Oxygen hissed into the airless passages. Feet drummed faintly.

Then Gerry Carlyle gave Louis Duval his epitaph.

"There lies," she said, "a very gallant gentleman."

***THE END***

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