

Blue Haze on Pluto **by Raymond Z. Gallun**

IT WASN'T TRUE. It couldn't be true! Misfortunes came—yes—but never in such a damnable knot of coincidences. It was ghastly, unreal, unnatural. He must have imagined this. Terry Sommers touched his forehead with his one good hand, finding, there, under the partovac mask he wore, the thick bruise that had stunned him. He glanced about, his eyes puzzled and vexed behind his goggles. Somewhere there must be a reassuring rift in the illusion.

No, it was real all right. Here he was, in the cabin of the space liner, or rather, in what remained of the cabin. The evidence was before him, around him, beating undeniably into his senses. The coachlike interior was a shambles. He saw twisted girders, crumpled plush, and human bodies that would move no more. Beyond the ports stark ramparts loomed, for the ship had fallen into a deep crevasse where it might not be discovered for months, even though a party would, of course, be ordered out to search for it.

Steep crags, part ice, part frozen atmosphere, reared up in the purple gloom that was daylight on Pluto. Ghoulish forms composed of the same substances, jagged, furry, somehow alive, shining with a phosphorescence of their own, were clustered on the floor and sides of the crevasse. The air of the cabin glittered with frost crystals, for the cold of this outermost child of the Sun was seeping into the battered hull. Terry Sommers could almost feel it nipping at his flesh, even through his partovac attire. The stillness mingled oppressively with the ache in his broken wrist, and the specks of color that danced before his vision.

He watched the glow fade from an illuminator that hung askew from the warped wall. It was a pretty little thing of tooled bronze, fitted with a pink shade. That illuminator was a symbol, somehow, of the luxuries of civilization—luxuries that were only a step from death.

He glanced dazedly down at the belt of stout webbing that had held him in his seat. He recalled the explosion in the machinery of the craft, and the eerie whine that had followed. Then the steward had announced calmly that the twelve passengers must prepare for a crash. They had scrambled into their partovacs, the thick fabric and vacuum compartments of which might at least be expected to shield them for a short time from the bitter Plutonian climate.

The concussion of the fall, an instant before he had been stunned, still thudded gratingly in Terry's mind. Yes, it had all happened! He was stranded without hope of succor in a frigid hell of which he knew almost nothing. In thirty minutes it would be night. Just a few hours more, and the cold that came with darkness would get him even here in the ship. That he had not perished in the accident was mockery.

Nor was it his position alone that troubled him. There was something else that he remembered; something that perhaps wasn't his business, since he was only a passenger. But it impressed him now as the crowning misfortune of a series of disastrous coincidences.

An hour or two ago, the man who had occupied the seat just ahead had told him about a mission. In Pindar, the smaller of the two Terrestrial settlements of Pluto, a plague was raging. Sylfane, it was called, Ganymede in origin. The disease was produced by a siliceous microorganism, entirely different from anything of the kind known on Earth. It absorbed the water from the system of any plant or animal it attacked. More than once Sylfane had been described as the deadliest pest in the Solar System.

TERRY SOMMERS knew what the plague was like, for he had seen cases of it before, during his wanderings on a dozen spheres as a member of various itinerant vaudeville troupes. In five hours' time a human being fairly withered up before one's eyes! In his memory there was a picture of a girl who had succumbed to the dread affliction. With death around him now, it was easy for Terry to grasp the reality of death out there in that lonely settlement—so easy that, after a moment, a kind of blurred panic possessed him.

Savagely he tore the fastenings of his safety belt loose, and stumbled erect. His sound hand, thick-gloved, moved forward, grasping the shoulder of the man in the seat ahead of him, who had told him about the epidemic in Pindar.

"We've got to deliver the antitoxin!" he cried hoarsely, his words issuing in a muffled babble from the breath vent of his mask. "Doctor Cairns! Do you hear me? We've got to—" Terry did not finish his insistent plea. His arms dropped loosely to his sides. What he had known to be true was true beyond question; this was only a crushed corpse.

Human courage is often sufficient to accept any challenge; but nerve alone, in this case, was not enough. Flesh has its limitations, however high the spirit that directs it. No creature of Terrestrial protoplasm could journey on foot all the way across ten miles of Plutonian country at night, when clad only in a partovac. To do so was a physical impossibility.

There was no way to call for aid or to give the location of the ship so that it might be found here, concealed at the bottom of the crevasse. The radio was not only smashed; it was unreachable. The sketchy SOS, given during the first shock of the unexpected catastrophe, could hardly have stated the position of the crash adequately, even if the operator had been able to predict just where it was to take place. Nor could Terry think of any means of signaling to the several fliers who even now must be preparing to set out from Pindar in quest of the wreck. Unless they came near before dark, there was small possibility indeed that he would be able to indicate the place where the liner had fallen.

However, Terry Sommers was both young and active. In youth, hope may flicker, but it seldom burns out. Terry's attention came to rest on the baggage compartment above Cairns's crumpled form. A hasty inspection enabled him to find the valise which contained tubes of white powder—the Sylfane antitoxin which Cairns had been taking to Pindar. The precious cargo was within reach, and undamaged. The fact seemed to act as a stimulus upon Sommers.

With something definite to do, he felt more buoyant. First he groped through the wreckage, examining the several bodies that he was able to reach.

All but one were corpses. A tiny Venusian still breathed shallowly, though he was unconscious, and, Terry believed, dying. His legs, tangled in the debris of the cabin, were broken. Gently Terry disengaged them; though to attempt to take the little fellow along with him toward Pindar he felt would be pointless.

Gritting his teeth to suppress the pain in his shattered wrist, Terry prepared for the venture. The partovac, thick, insulated, and equipped with heating coils in its air-tight fabric, offered considerable protection against the cold, though a space suit would have been much better. He found three flasks of oxygen in an overhead compartment—enough to last perhaps five hours. These he attached clumsily to the respirator system of his mask. Then he fastened the valise filled with antitoxin to his belt. There was nothing else to do. He was ready.

HE WAS struggling with the warped bolts of the door of the cabin, when a soft cry, querulous and low, like that of a bird lost in a storm, trilled behind him.

He wheeled about. The Venusian had come to his senses and had raised himself weakly on his elbows.

Sommers swore angrily. "I can't be bothered with you, you crazy imp!" he hissed. "Why don't you just quit? Why don't you curl up like you should, and get it over with!"

It was brutal. Maybe it had to be. But no, his tone at least could have been less ruthless.

"Sorry," he mumbled apologetically under his mask.

Large eyes, covered by goggles, regarded him through the cavernous twilight. Terry couldn't see much of the Venusian because of the partovac the tiny man wore, but he knew what Venusians were like—frail, fuzzy, with pink skin showing through the fuzz. Like a new-hatched bird. Hideous, pathetic. Tough though; they could take a lot of abuse.

Whether this one could understand what he had said, he couldn't be sure. Venus folk didn't have the vocal equipment to master human speech and the sign language they used to communicate with Terrestrials Terry had never learned. He saw the elf's fingers move in some kind of gesture, but its significance was beyond him. He thought, however, that he detected resignation in the great eyes. They

appraised the valise of antitoxin intelligently. Could it be that this imp grasped the situation, and was accepting his fate to increase the chances of others? Yes, it seemed a bit like courage, and a bit like heroism. It impressed Terry Sommers.

His sentiments established a grudging compromise. "I'm an idiot to do this," he grumbled. "But the finish would be the same anyway."

He hoisted the Venusian to his back, and contrived to strap him in place. The tiny fellow gave a chirp of anguish, winced, shuddered, and went limp. The pain of movement had sent his mind back into oblivion. Terry bit his lip to suppress the savage throb in his own wrist.

It took a minute to force an exit from the cabin. Air puffed past him as the door flew open, for the pressure inside had been greater than that of the planet's half-congealed atmosphere. He strode forth into a domain that was never meant to be ruled by humans.

From somewhere deep within him a burst of adventurous gayety surged up.

He wasn't an iron man, accustomed to battling the raw conditions of hostile worlds. He was a trouper, a clown, who, with tricks and jokes and song, had added a little leavening to the hard lives of colonists scattered throughout the Solar System. Even now, if the accident hadn't happened, he would be approaching Nadir, the larger city of Pluto, to join up with six others of his profession. "Bits of tawdry tinsel," an old explorer had once dubbed his kind deprecatingly. Remembering this, Terry Sommers gave a grim chuckle in which there was a note of defiance.

Spiny cactiform crystals, shimmering with an inner luminescence of their own, were all about him, breast-high, covering the floor of the crevasse like a thicket of grotesque jewels. They broke with brittle, tinkling sounds as he forced his way through their ranks. Long, slender, furry parts of them groped through the gloom, and touched him in a way that was half hungry, half inquisitive. They were neither plant nor animal nor the inanimate creation of a purely physical process. They lived, and in a dim way they were intelligent! Yet they were not composed of protoplasm, but of ice, and of liquefied and frozen gases which on Earth would have been a permanent part of the atmosphere. Their vital processes were electrical. That much Terry Sommers remembered from the few sketchy accounts he had read of conditions on Pluto, a world which he had never before visited.

It had seemed fantastic; but Terry realized now that it was not fantastic at all. It was natural. The outer planets beyond the orbit of Jupiter were too heatless to support fauna and flora whose protoplasm was similar to that of the fauna and flora of Earth. And so, life, ever adaptable to the conditions imposed by environment, had taken the form of these frigid monstrosities, beautiful yet abhorrent.

LIFE was a queer thing anyway, difficult to describe. You could say that it was something that grew and reproduced its kind and made use of some form of energy; but that was about as specific as you dared be in stating a definition. There were living things on Mercury, Venus, and Mars, quite like those of Earth.

The moons of Jupiter, however, possessed a form of life that was unique, of which the microorganisms that produced Sylfane were an example. Crystalline, it was, hard, composed chiefly of siliceous minerals, indifferent to both heat and cold. And on worlds farther out in the heatless void, these frosty nightmares were dominant, though on at least one of the moons of Saturn, Terry knew that there was a vaporous form of life. There were some scientists who argued that even in the inconceivably hot photosphere of the Sun, a phenomenon might exist which was comparable in many ways to the process of life on lesser spheres!

Awed at his ruminations, Terry Sommers directed his gaze upward. Above was a ragged ribbon of sky, between the crests of the deep trench that hemmed him in. Stars dotted its purple depths. Anaemic sunshine sparkled on the eastern lip of the crevasse.

Terry selected what seemed a favorable place, and started to climb. It was two hundred feet to the top of the rampart and nearly vertical all the way. Hand and foot holds were plentiful but precarious and likely to break at any instant. With every upward surge, rime of frozen air showered down upon his partovac making him look like some fantastic frost imp. The feeble gravity was the trump which made the ascent possible. Burdened as he was, he still weighed much less than he would have on his native planet.

More than a trifle dazed, he reached the top. Glowing through the tenuous, half-congealed atmosphere, was the Sun—a shrunken speck of incandescence billions of miles away. In a few minutes it would set. Then the unbelievable cold of the Plutonian night would begin to strike home, biting through his partovac.

However, he scarcely considered this promise of death now. A kind of dull horror and a sense of inadequacy possessing his mind, he started eastward. Somewhere beyond the serrated jumble of crags and ice hills, rearing in stark denial ahead, Pindar lay. He was attempting to reach Pindar; he was attempting the impossible.

Plod, plod, plod. His feet tramped through a semiliquid slush. It looked like snow, but it wasn't. Up slope, down into hollow, up slope— And everywhere those frosty monsters reached for him, touched him, and snapped with the brittle jingle of shattered glass. The sound came in a muffled whisper through his helmet. His shadow, long, attenuated, grotesque, bobbed along before him. This was a fairyland of an incomparable bejeweled beauty—and a hell of ghastly grandeur.

Above the crests of the hills, too far off to be examined in any detail, several blobs of haze hung, adding their touch of strangeness to the un-Earthly scene. They were bluish like steel, and semi-opaque. They coiled and swirled in a way that seemed too erratic to be ascribed to air currents alone. Within them was a suggestion of phosphorescence, and they produced a faint, crackling rustle, like an aurora. Terry Sommers wondered about them, conscious of an unease. Some desire for reassurance made him glance back at the Venusian, who had recovered his senses. The little fellow's eyes clung intently, fearfully, to those masses of haze. Sommers decided that it was best to keep as far from them as possible.

Plod, plod, plod. At first the going was fairly easy; then it became monotonous, then torturing. The torture of it grew and grew, slowly yet inexorably. Out of the purple eastern sky white flakes began to sift down as night approached. A thin breeze accompanied it. Terry's body was becoming curiously numb and wooden.

The light was failing. Dusk. Colder. A panicky terror warmed his flesh a trifle, and he started to run. He stumbled once and fell. Powdery crystals showered around him. He arose and continued doggedly, on.

Night brought enchantments that eclipsed the glories of the day. Above, stars burned with sardonic splendor, faintly veiled by sifting flakes of congealed atmosphere. Plutonian life glimmered like serried hosts of huge gems in whose hearts icy fire of every hue throbbed and cascaded.

Terry Sommers did not see their beauty—only their horror. Darkness seemed to increase their activity. Jagged spurs darted toward him, as if attempting to pierce his partovac. If they did—

He tried not to think of that; he only sought to fight on. The blobs of haze were clearer now, yet still mysterious, glowing a frosty, translucent blue.

AN HOUR went by. He must have covered several miles since the outset, running, jumping, plodding. Was he any nearer to Pindar? He thought he saw the red streak of a beacon fan ray sweeping the dark firmament far ahead, yet he couldn't be sure. Above, and a mile to the left, a flier zigzagged, searching for the space ship that was supposed to bring antitoxin to the smitten city. Terry wanted to shout to it, to scream out that he was there. But to do so, he realized, would be a useless waste of effort.

Drowsiness was conquering him, clouding his senses and his ability to reason. It wasn't the effort that had depleted his energies; it was the cold, increasing every moment until at mid-night it would almost reach the ultimate zero of space itself. It was sort of puzzling the way he felt. His feet moved as if they composed a being separate from his body. They acted apparently without his guidance, stumbling, recovering, climbing obstacles. They didn't hurt him much; they ached dully, and felt stiff and awkward. He was angry at them for telling him that they ached and that they felt as they did. Why did they bother him? He had troubles of his own, hadn't he? What were those troubles? It was becoming difficult to keep them fixed in his mind.

Fear. Those blobs of blue haze, shimmering and shifting near the horizon, inspired fear in him even more than the jagged monsters that crowded around him opposing his passage. Something he

remembered was responsible. On Tethys, third satellite of Saturn, there was a haze like that. It was gaseous, corrosive, alive; it ate through metal and glass and flesh, like an acid. This world was a worse hell even than Tethys. Might not there be a still more dreadful haze here, then? The idea made Terry's pulses quicken with the dread of the unknown.

Yet he was angry—angry at himself for his inexperience, angry at Pindar for being so elusive, angry that Pindar had ever been built, angry at the oppressive weight of his burden, angry at almost everything.

What had Earthmen come to this God-forsaken piece of the universe for? Only because radium and actinium could be obtained here in large quantities. Radium and actinium to feed their damned machines ! Young Sommers cursed with the fogged vehemence of a drunken man. His lips pouted like a vexed child's.

Mingled with his resentments, fears were bright, fragmentary bits of his past, jumbled into a patternless medley: Some one named George. Some one called Ellane. Who was she? Oh yes, the girl who had danced at Vananis, the Earth settlement on Mars. Blond, sweet, really beautiful Endless wanderings, here and there, on this planet and that Rocket ships, baggage tags, costumes, jokes, jingles of music, gay, tragic— Mars—the cultivated lands roofed with glass to keep them warm; machines to free the oxygen from the red ferric oxides of the soil. Silk tapestries, carved stone pillars, friendly shadows. And warmth—damn it!—warmth! Trouper, clown—bits of tawdry tinsel—hell! Venus—terrifically hot and fiercely cold, but never as cold as the mildest day on Pluto. Io, Ganymede, Callisto. The Rings of Saturn—The domed Earth colonies everywhere. Why?

A feeble movement in his burden aroused young Sommers a trifle and made him remember the Venusian he carried. Terry was angry because he was there. "Little fool!" he mumbled several times. "Little useless fool!"

One of those clouds of blue haze was shifting closer in what seemed stealth. But it was all so indistinct and illusive. Terry stumbled on a crystal thing, recovered himself, and then kicked it with vengeful force. But he was reeling. A few steps more and he would be down.

Again the Venusian moved. Then he voiced a piercing scream that even his mask could not muffle effectively. It sounded like the cry of a terror-stricken demon. Once more he sent that unEarthly yell of his echoing into the night.

Terry was furious. "Stop that!" he growled dully. "Stop! Do you want us to be devoured? If you're scared, keep still anyway!"

However, if the tiny fellow understood his command, he did not obey. Again he screamed.

Clumsily Sommers aimed a blow at him. His hand, numb and wooden, fell glancingly; the Venusian strapped to his hip, crumpled.

Then Terry tried to dodge up a gorge, inspired by some dim hope of eluding the haze. He saw that it was useless. The shrill vibrations of the yells had impinged upon some sensory faculty which those clouds of gaseous life possessed. They were sweeping toward him from all sides. And the fog of unconsciousness, produced by the cold, was thickening in his brain. He saw sinuous, fiery shapes of vapor squirm and wriggle in the air about him. And there were things that looked like the carved heads of devils, animated.

With a last spurt of energy he fought through the thicket of frost monsters around him, and reached the summit of a knoll. His body swayed, sagged; he toppled in a heap amid glassy fragments.

Was that Pindar he had glimpsed on a lofty plateau several miles ahead? Or had he only imagined that he had seen a great crystal dome ribbed with metal, glowing like the domes of all colonial cities? It didn't matter now. The city was out of reach. It had always been out of reach. It was not worth bothering about. He was very comfortable here.

The blue clouds converged upon him. Sinuous wisps of vapor touched him. He felt the first electrical tingle of their caress as they began to eat into his partovac. Corrosive death! Funny he wasn't impressed. Mingling with the hiss of the oxygen valve in his mask was a hypnotic whisper and crackle like that of an aurora.

Trouper—here, there, everywhere—Wirrah, Venus; Oktor, Callisto—

Bits of tawdry tinsel—music—Lita—Those past impressions continued to swirl in the brain of Terry

Sommers, till, at some indefinite moment, the process ceased.

AWAKENING was a surprise. There was the smell of disinfectant about him. Bright lights and white walls. A pillow was beneath his head.

His body ached a trifle, but not enough to be annoying. Bandages covered tender areas—frostbites mostly. A man was near by, busy with something. He was elderly, and wore a small Vandyke beard.

Several moments passed while Terry sought to straighten matters out. Then, sure that he made no error, he greeted: "Hello, doc!"

The physician wheeled, but before he could say anything, Terry flung a volley of questions at him.

"We've been wanting to tell you, young man," the doctor replied huskily. "We've been wanting to thank you. Yes, this is Pindar. The antitoxin you brought has saved us."

"But who found me, and how did they find me?" Terry insisted.

"Addison's fire," said the doctor. "It collected above you in a huge mass. The patrol fliers were searching for the space ship, and naturally they investigated so huge a cloud of the fire, since it usually indicated the presence of something interesting."

"The blue haze, you mean?" Terry inquired. "I thought it was dangerous."

"The blue haze," the physician answered. "And it is dangerous—the most dangerous thing on Pluto; next to the cold. See what it did to your partovac! A few minutes more—" He shrugged.

Terry glanced at the worn garment flung limply over a chair and shuddered. It looked as though moths had been at it, though moths could scarcely have eaten into the composition-doped steel-and-asbestos texture of its fabric.

"But it saved your life," the doctor went on. "The fire is alive, electrical. It creates a small quantity of heat within itself—enough in your case to keep out the cold until you were rescued. But it was a terrific gamble. We wondered if you did it purposely, or if it was just a coincidence. The fire is sensitive to short sound waves. A high, shrill note will attract it, you know."

"I didn't know!" Terry burst out with enthusiasm. "The Venusian did, though! It was he who attracted the haze, and I thought he was just scared! Where is he? Is he all right?" Sommers had raised himself on his elbow.

His informer's features brightened. "He's all right, or will be when his legs heal," he responded. "You are more frostbitten than he is. Look behind you!"

Terry turned. In the bed beside his lay a fuzzy little man with great eyes. The eyes were watching him with a curious twinkle that had the quality of a smile, though smiles Venusian faces could not register. Terry felt awe, and a strange inner warmth.

The doctor uttered an odd, whistling note, attempting a Venusian word. "That's his name," he explained. "He's been here in Pindar quite often. Quite a character. Biology is his hobby, but he's one of these show people. From your passport I gather you're one, too."

Young Sommers was unaccountably speechless. Intently he watched, while the fuzzy little man drew something from under the bed covering. It glittered as a bandaged paw raised it to his lips. A harmonica!

Then he began to play—a curious jingle, Earthly yet un-Earthly. It was the jingle of tinsel, and yet there was hard steel in it somewhere.

Terry chuckled softly. Contrasts! It was funny to see a Venus elf blowing a mouth organ! There was lettering on the instrument. He couldn't read it from where he was, but he suspected with a nostalgic twinge, that it spelled: "Made in U. S. A."

His hand went up in a sort of salute. "Hi, trouper!" he said.