

THE DUAL WORLD

**Tommy Strike Wants to Catch-'Em-Alive on the Lost Continent
of Venus, but an Amazing Race of Twins Catapult
Him Into Double Trouble!**

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CHAPTER I *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 men crawled about the gleaming hull, equipped with magnetic shoes. Both wore antiseptic helmets, as they worked slowly forward from stern 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 motor-oiler 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 Gerry Carlyle *always* leads the hunt! So 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 nameplate 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 men scrambled



The Emotionals poured out of the mist

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 eardrums. 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 girl, 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 the 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.



Tommy Strike

“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 underselling 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! 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 bio-chemists 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 in and was hovering anxiously about, trying to avert a quarrel, exuding peace and good-fellowship all over the chart-room.

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 life-forms 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, tobacco-chewing sort of bluff that she put on to command the respect and complete loyalty of a crew of the so-called stronger sex. 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. Don't 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 unmaidenly 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



Gerry Carlyle

of fortune-hunter when he married the girl.

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. Pickup 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 II

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 again.

"All ship-shape, 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 dunce-rabbits. They're migratory. Terrific pests."

The dunce-rabbits 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*.

"Dunce-rabbits?" 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 bugs of some sort of meningitis-like brain disease are carried about with 'em. Very virulent, and always fatal as soon as they get to work. The whole race of dunce-rabbits 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 men bellowed with laughter.

STRIKE always said afterward that the finding of the so-called Lost Continent was anticlimax, 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 men 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."

BARROWS' 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 waistband. About his waist he strapped the anti-gravity outfit, and carried by hand the portable electronic 'scope.

"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 'em 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 dunce-rabbits 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, sir, 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 dumbfounded 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 shovel-mouth 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 lab. 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 dunce-rabbit 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 fiancée of his, and make himself some money. So he detoured around the slingshot 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.

“Good God!” 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!” He 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 slingshot 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 ‘im!” 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 dunce-rabbits 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 III

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 dunce-rabbits 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, sir?"

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 dunce-rabbits 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 score 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 cerebration. 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?"

"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 wriggled 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 dunce-rabbits 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 Emotionals, 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 dunce-rabbits. 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 doorways here looks like a tropical fish, only his mouth is wide open all the time. He's as big around as he is 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 dunce-rabbits 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 Emotionalists running at him with expressions of indescribable hate and gerocity. 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 outran 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 stow away their specimen, so Strike hurriedly fastened lead-rope and anti-gravity 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 Emotionalists 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 dunce-rabbits? 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 dunce-rabbit 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 dunce-rabbit, 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 dunce-rabbit 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 Emotional 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 Emotional 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 adrenalin 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 Emotional, 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 an utterly alien and hostile world, watching it bring all its untamed powers to bear in a terrible plan for his destruction.

CHAPTER IV

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 setup. 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 girl, 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 Emotional, 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. That's supposed to be man's prerogative. Maybe I've worn pants too long—" 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 the girl's 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."

THE girl 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 buzzard-like 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 luminal in the storeroom. The standard space-sickness remedy. You know what luminal does, Mike? Affects strongly the autonomic nervous system, counteracts adrenin. 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 luminal 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 sub-normally with so much luminal inside it, took the initial advantage by virtue of surprise. There was a sharp clashing as the armored Emotionalists were struck by the chitinous lorica of the rotifer, and two of the former vanished into the rotifer's vast gullet.

The ruthless attack forced the Emotionalists 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 Emotionalists, 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 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 dunce-rabbit, 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 all woman, 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 men.

"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?"

"Exactly."

See-No-Evil mewed plaintively and delicately covered his eyes, one with each paw. Like the rest of his breed, it was about time for him to go crazy, anyhow.