

# ASSIGNMENT THREE

## SATELLITE FIVE

by Arthur K. Barnes

Gerry Carlyle; Interplanetary Huntress

### CHAPTER I

#### 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, banging 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 oldtime 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 II

### 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 oldtime 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 III

#### 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. Cutter 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, harddrinking 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 one 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 fiance 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 IV

### 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 bull. Scams 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 snaillike 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 damnedest 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 beatray, 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 beat-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.

Jerkingly 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 anaesthetic 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 anaesthetic gas as well.

"Well," said Gerry cheerfully, "I guess we'll just have to quit playing games."

## CHAPTER V

### 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 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 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