

FirebrandFirebrand
by A Bertram Chandler
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Pulse-Pounding Feature-Length Novelet of Vengeance on Venus!

Could this then be the notorious Firbrand, and the thing at her slim waist the notorious, blood Weapon? This small dark woman with hair cropped almost like a man's--could she have pirated the Terran spaceliner? But Fleming knew he'd have his answers perhaps sooner than he wished. . . .

CHAPTER I

HE CAME slowly out the door of the trading post. He was mopping his brow with a large, gaudily patterned handkerchief. It was hot inside the garish, shoddy building, in spite of all the efforts of the air conditioning plant. It was hotter outside. And the trader cursed softly, without enthusiasm, as a matter of routine. He cursed the heat, the humidity, the perspiration that dripped from the tip of his high-bridged nose, that ran in clammy rivulets down his smooth, hairless body, that saturated the loin-cloth that was his only clothing.

It was almost sunset.

The blur of light--hazy, diffuse--that was all that was ever seen of the sun from Venus, hung low above the western horizon, turning the sullen yellow of the sky to hot gold. Eastward, darkly ominous shadows were already creeping up the eternal overcast. And there was a faint flicker of lightning, a low growl of thunder, sensed rather than heard.

Inland from the post stretched the marshy plains, the lush, low jungle. Distant, more than half shrouded by mists, were the unpretentious undulations of the smooth hills. And to the north was the sea--like the sky above it, a dirty yellow. Little tired wavelets collapsed in utter exhaustion upon the grey beach, well below the line of oozing, gelatinous scum that was high water mark. And there was a brief flurry of foam as something big and black broke surface, threshed the water with tail and fins, then vanished.

The trader stood at the root of the jetty, stared out to the north-west. Now and again he raised his hand absently, brushed away the little winged insects that hovered in a dancing cloud around his close-cropped blond head. But all his attention was given to the distant skyline. Vague it was,

3 and misty. And nothing solid broke the indeterminate union between sea and sky. It seemed that nothing ever had broken it--that nothing ever would. But the trading post, the jetty, were evidence that ships had sailed these seas. Had sailed. . . .

Already Aphrodite, the little freighter operated by the Venus Trading Corporation, was a week overdue. Long since, the trader would have called Port Lanning to make enquiries, but for the fact that among the cargo that Aphrodite should have been bringing were spares to replace certain burned out components of his radio.

He was worried. This had never happened before. Aphrodite, until now, had always arrived with clockwork regularity. And the long talk, the drinking session, with her skipper had been one of the few, welcome breaks in his monotonous routine, one of the things that helped to keep him sane. And the natives were talking, he knew. He had seen them looking out to sea, had heard them muttering among themselves in their croaking, incomprehensible language. And the drums had been beating in the low hills, had been rapping their intelligence from peak to insignificant peak, from island to island.

He was a man alone--one lone alien among hostile myriads. His weapons commanded respect but he knew that, if it came to a showdown, he could not hope

to stand off assault, siege, indefinitely. He allowed himself a momentary disloyalty to the Corporation, a dull resentment against their policy of economy, retrenchment, that had reduced the staffs of the trading posts from two or three to one. With two men to stand watch and watch the post would be practically impregnable. With two men to man the launch the dangers of the hazardous voyage to Port Lanning would be more than halved.

He was a man alone--and he almost felt that he was the last of his kind upon this steaming world. There were times when he would have thought so save for the fact that, once or twice in the last three days, he had heard the drumming of rockets, the distant, whistling scream of jet-propelled aircraft, above the clouds.

The sun went down, and the gold faded to yellow, to green, and the indigo shadows crept across the sky, and the lightning was dazzlingly violet, running down in rivers of vivid flame from the zenith. And where the little waves lapped listlessly at the sand was a dim, pallid fire, and where the line of scum lay along the high water mark was a brighter light, shining with the luminescence of decay, of rottenness. And in the hills and in the jungle drum answered drum, the staccato, coded melody drowned ever and again by the crashing thunder, fading and swelling as the rising, gusty wind veered and shifted.

The first rain began to fall.

For long moments the trader stood in the downpour grateful for the refreshing, clearing coolness. And then his body shook with a slight chill, and he remembered that his alarms were yet to be set and tested, and that he would be a good target against the glow from the door of the post, and that his pale body would stand out against the darkness in vivid relief with each lightning flash.

4 Walking slowly, striving to ignore the uncomfortable feeling in his shoulder blades as he walked to the open door, turned his back to the hostile marsh and jungle, he went inside. And the door shut, and there was no longer any light save that of the lightning and the phosphorescence of the sea; and the post, shrouded in rain and darkness, its garish colours forgotten, loomed like a fort.

It was a fort.

There was a brief rattle of fire from the cupola on the roof as the trader tested his guns against the coming night.

And the drums, distant but insistent, answered.

THE TRADER pushed aside his plate, fumbled in the pouch at his belt for his cigarettes. One more carton, he thought. I shall have to go easy .. And his mind, as he brooded over this last deprivation, was that of a filially devoted but unjustly punished child. I have always been a loyal servant of the Corporation, he thought. The trite phrase pleased him, and he repeated it aloud. And his memory, as he smoked the rationed cigarette, ran over the countless instances in which he had proved his loyalty--petty economies, shrewd bargains, frank and unashamed swindling.

He sighed, rose from the table. He carried the dirty plates, the debris of his meal, into the little scullery. The debris of the last meal was still there, and that of the meal before--but until it became offensive he would take no steps to dispose of it. He returned to his living room, got out his Log and his account books. And there he sat until the scratching of his pen was drowned by the shrilling of the alarm.

His first action when he reached the cupola was to open the switch that put the guns on automatic fire.

Had he not done so they would have blasted, in a very few seconds, the figure that was staggering through the rain, over the short, sodden, grass-like vegetation towards the post. The stranger, wavering like a white moth in the beam of his searchlight, was indisputably human. Here was no scaly monstrosity, no Disney frog trying to look like a man, no batrachien undecided whether to

walk erect or hop.

The trader cursed. It was obvious, in spite of the teeming rain, the downpouring torrent that turned the beam of his searchlight into liquid silver, that his visitor was a woman. Again he swore--but his oaths lacked any real weight. It was a full month since his last leave in Vennsburg, since his immersion in the mercenary delights, the commercialized ecstasies, of that city. And he was hungry for the sound of a female voice, the sight of a female face and figure, the feel of soft woman-flesh against own.

But suddenly he became aware that the beating of the drums was no longer distant, was no longer confined to the distant hills. The thunder and the lightning had ceased, and there was no sound but the incessant beat of the rain--the beat of the rain and the beating of the drums. From all around it came, from the south and the east and the west. And the fringe of the jungle from

5 which the girl had run seemed to waver, to put out pseudo-pods, to creep out over the pallid marshland.

There was a flicker of fire, then, along the jungle verge. And there were great goutts of spray tossed up at the girl's feet. And she weaved as she ran--and the trader realized that her unsteady gait was not altogether the result of fatigue, that she was putting the unseen marksmen behind her off their aim.

A flick of the hand--and the searchlight was on manual control. Another deft motion and the door of the post was opened. And then the beam swept up, and along the tide of dark, glistening bodies, showed with pitiless clarity the horde of Venusian Swamplanders, pointed them out to the questing tracer of the heavy machine gun. The attack surged forward over its own debris. And the flashes of fire along its front became more frequent, and the strange thudding made by the rifle bullets as they struck the thick, tough plasti-glass of the cupola.

But it couldn't go on for long. Savages the Venusians may have been--but they were intelligent savages. Nonhuman they were--but, like humankind, each individual placed a definite value upon his own life.

And so the tide withdrew, and the marsh was presently splotched by the great, pallid bodies of the scavenger worms that oozed up from out the sodden soil, and the song of the drums grew distant and still more distant, and drum answered drum from peak to insignificant peak, and rattling, incomprehensible messages ran all the long, stragglng length of the Van Dusen Archipelago.

And the trader put his weapons, his searchlight, once again on automatic control, tested his circuits, and went down from the cupola to meet his unexpected guest.

CHAPTER II of Firebrand!

SHE WAS SMALL, this woman and darkly brunette, her hair closely cropped, almost like a man's. And the face was neither beautiful nor even conventionally pretty, but it had a charm, a vivacity under the fatigue, that made uninteresting by comparison the simpering Venusburg beauties flaunting their half-nude charms in full color all along the walls of the trader's living room.

Her upper garment was in rags, and the smooth skin, from shoulder to waist, from thigh to broken sandals, was a network of scratches, evidence of the thorns and brambles through which she had forced her way. And the blood oozed still from the shallow wounds, spread in a wet film over the wet, smooth skin.

Above the bedraggled loincloth was a belt, and from it depended a holster, and from the holster protruded the butt of a heavy pistol. Sight of the weapon, of its gained wood grip worn smooth and polished by long handling, did much to inhibit the emotions that were stirring in the woman-

6 starved man. And as he shifted his gaze to her cool grey eyes, his own faltering uneasily under the steadiness of her regard, she spoke.

"Thank you," she said simply.

It was gratitude--but it was gratitude such as might be displayed by royalty in the acknowledgement of some service performed by a courtier. There was some power, in her or behind her, that demanded assistance as though by divine right.

The trader's glance fell to her feet, to the pools of water that were slowly growing on the thick pile of the carpet.

"In there," he said with a gesture towards the door, "you'll find some dry clothes. . . And ointment for your scratches. There is some danger of infection."

"I know."

The voice, a contralto that could have been sultry, was cool, almost disinterested. The man was at a loss. This woman was altogether outside his experience. But he went to his bedroom, picked up a pile of garments almost at random, gave them to her with a hint of shyness, of apology. And he went to a cupboard, brought out his last precious bottle of whisky, set it, with two glasses, on the table. And he emptied the contents of two whole packets of cigarettes into an ornamental box that was but rarely used. And he ran his hand over his chin, and wished that he had shaved. And then he went back into his bedroom and changed his plain none-too-clean loincloth for one that was patterned with gay flowered designs, that to his mind had always suggested palm trees, guitars, a full tropical moon. And when the girl came out he was disappointed to see that she was still wearing her gun.

SHE HAD achieved a sarong effect with the clothes that he had given her. It suited her. All that she lacked was an hibiscus flower behind the ear. Ugly, incongruous, was the broad leather belt, the holster, the heavy pistol. And so was the case or pouch that hung on her right hip, that was bulging with what had the appearance of papers.

The trader, mute enquiry in his eyes, poured whisky into her glass. When it was almost full she signalled[sic] to him to stop. Before he could fill his own she had raised hers, had swallowed its contents with almost a single gulp.

She said: "I needed that."

"You really must have." The man was shallowly sympathetic. Then--"My name is Fleming, Peter to my friends. And this place is Howard's Landing."

"Howard's Landing? Tell me, Fleming, how can I get to Port Lanning?"

"By sea. There is a launch. But Aphrodite should be in at any moment now. She is a week overdue already."

7 "She'll never come. But how soon can we leave? It is imperative that I get to the port as soon as possible."

"Not, so fast," ejaculated Fleming. There was too much secrecy--even though it was unintentional--too much high-handed demanding. "Before we go any further--who are you? What are you? What are you doing here? And--" he had just realised the calm certainty with which she had made her statement "--what do you know about Aphrodite?"

"Don't you know?" It was the girl's turn to be surprised.

"No. Both my transmitter and receiver burned out two days before the ship was here last. She should have been bringing spares . . . "

There was a little silence, broken only by the steady drumming of the rain on roof and walls, by the distant drums calling from hill to hill, from island to island, all along the stragglng length of the Van Dusen Archipelago. And there was a sound that could have been rifle fire, but it was too far away to bring any hint of immediate menace.

The girl looked at the trader, at the useless radio set along the further wall. She got to her feet, sagging a little, for she was very tired. And she went to the receiver, tinkered a while with dials and switches, satisfied herself that the apparatus was in truth inoperative. Then--

"You must have heard of me. I am Elspeth Van Dusen. And Aphrodite will not be coming because she has been seized by us, has been converted into a gunboat."

Fleming said, harshly: "You are talking in riddles. But I have heard of you. The Van Dusen woman. The firebrand. And there is a reward for you."

"Yes." The girl's hand fell to the polished butt of her pistol. Her face told of some mental struggle, of a decision struggling to be made, of alternatives weighed and balanced. The exact nature of the struggle the man was never to know--whether or not to hand out to him the same line of propaganda that had been handed out to the other traders, that had won most of them to the rebel cause; whether or not to count on the dangerous, two-edged weapon of her sex.

And the tension in the room was intensified as some shift of wind, some freak of conductivity, brought again the rhythmic throbbing, the coded melody, drum calling drum from peak to unpretentious peak, drum answering drum all along the straggling length of the archipelago.

PERHAPS it was the drums that decided her. It was the low throbbing, beating in time with her pulse, the rhythm of her blood, that told her that, here and now the use of her womanly weapons would be dangerous to herself. And she was tired, and she doubted her ability to keep the situation under control should she allow it to develop.

"This is how things stand," she said, her voice crisp, official. We, the colonists, have risen against the Corporation. Most of the cities are with us, the bulk of the traders. And some of the Corporation police have deserted to us, bringing their arms. We hold the Macrae Coast from Port

8 Lanning to just south of Venusburg. There is fighting in De Kuyper's Land. There has been a naval action in the Rynin Straits, with heavy losses on both sides. And neither of us has air superiority--neither of us has any air force to boast about. Most of the rockets and jet planes were destroyed on the ground, by sabotage..."

And Earth. . . ?"

"Earth is neutral. Earth will intervene only if either side uses atomic weapons. The Commissioner announced that his duty was merely to protect the interests of Terran nationals. And--under corporation law--there are no Earth nationals on Venus. Only the commissioner, his staff, and the crews of the two space liners still at Port Lemaire."

"And you say that most of the traders are with you?"

The girl looked at his face; puzzled it was, incredulous, but not unintelligent. Dispassionately she analysed him. He has a brain, she told herself with a flash of insight, but no mind... With distaste, but almost with sympathy, she applied the rules of the science, the art, she had learned when she was a student of psychology, the skill that had been of such value to her as a propagandist. And she saw on what fertile ground the seeds of Corporation indoctrination had fallen. The Corporation was more than bread and butter--it was mother and father, it was Earth. And it was the friend of the little man who would be king, of the type not sufficiently able, or just a little too unlucky, to rise to high rank on any of the democratic worlds. That was it. Under its rule the Corporation gave kingship. True--it was only the rule of a few square miles of swamp, of jungle, over a few hundred or a few thousand non-human savages. But it was power, the authority to be a just or an unjust judge, the sole arbiter in disputes, to kill or spare without question. For, so long as the Corporation's posts showed a profit, no questions were asked. And the traders, neither merchant nor civil servant nor bureaucrat, but a little of all three, held undisputed sway over most of the area of Venus outside the cities.

And they hated the people of the cities--the intellectuals, the masterless men. They hated them for their enmity to the Corporation. They hated them for their intention to raise the far from brainless Swamplanders to human cultural levels. For they had long been monarchs by Divine Right--and the Corporation was

their god.

"Most of the traders are with us," said the girl again.

"With you?"

"Of course."

"And the others?"

"Dead."

"You filthy murderers!" shouted Fleming. He took a step towards her, hand upraised, face contorted with passion, the loose, weak mouth set in a hard line of hate. And he stopped when he

9 realized that he was looking straight into the muzzle of the girl's pistol. She had drawn with the swiftness and smoothness of a striking snake--and he did not need to be told that she would pull the trigger should she think it expedient. He had seen weapons in women's hands before, but had sneered, had laughed, had refused to take either the weapons or their owners seriously.

But this was different.

CHAPTER III of Firebrand!

WILL YOU sit down, said Elspeth Van Dusen. It was more of an order than a request. Her voice was emotionless. She gestured towards a chair with her gun.

Fleming sat down. He was not sorry. His knees were trembling, and he knew that the blood that had suffused his face had fled, that the shock of coming hard up against a purposiveness that would stop at nothing, must have produced a deathly pallor. And his pride was hurt and his comforting doctrine of male superiority had received a severe blow, and he needed time to at least--think of some face-saving gesture.

The woman sat opposite him, the lithe grace of all her movements struggling through the hampering garment of her weariness. And she lowered her pistol, but it and the hand that held it lay on her right knee, could move, if required, with deadly speed and accuracy.

She said: "Some of the traders have been murdered. Did you know Williamson at Taylor's Bay?"

Fleming nodded.

"He was Venus born. Yet he was loyal to the Corporation. He had his wife living at the post with him . . . "

...tall, golden of hair and golden of hair, Eleanora Williamson glided through Fleming's memory... There was the time that he had stopped overnight at Taylor's Bay on his way to Venusburg... And Williamson had been away, visiting the little chief of a nearby village... He'd returned early that evening, unfortunately but in the eyes of Eleanora had been the tacit understanding that some other time...

"...and she has been murdered, too. They flayed them alive, and used the skin for their drums..."

. . . and the memory of Eleanora was replaced by the vision of a screaming, red horror...

" . . . and it has been the Corporation that has murdered them--and many others."

Fleming fought down his rising nausea.

He said: "The Corporation? But . . . "

10 "Yes. The Corporation. You saw the mob that was after me. Where do you suppose they got their rifles? And they have machine guns, too, and artillery--the old, worn-out pieces that have been thrown out of the police arsenals . . . "

"The Corporation? Arming the natives?" This was the ultimate crime, the unforgiveable sin--and yet he was not as incredulous as he should have been. His reception of the story was the crystallisation[sic] of months, of years of

doubts, of disapproval of petty economies, of unnecessary harshness towards employees. He must have known for a long time that his idol had feet of clay--but he would never have admitted it. It had taken this stranger, this hated firebrand from the cities, to push the false god from its pedestal.

He said, flatly: "I don't believe it."

He almost convinced himself with the conviction in his tone.

"No?"

SHIFTING her gun to her left hand, holding it at the ready, the girl fumbled in her wallet. Papers fell out, littered the floor. At last she found that which she wanted--a score or so of sheets of various sizes, clipped together. She threw them to the trader. And she stooped to retrieve the documents, the flimsy sheets with their intricate designs, that had fallen to the floor. And Fleming saw his chance, and moved swiftly--but not swiftly enough. Again he was looking into the muzzle of the pistol. And--

"Next time I fire," said the girl. Then-- "While you're here you can pick these up for me."

Fleming picked them up. There were documents of all kinds. There were banknotes of high denominations--not Corporation money but good, solid Earth currency. Elspeth Van Dusen's eyes narrowed when he handed them to her. She could have sworn that only reports and similar papers, valueless to all save those in the movement, had fallen. She had made, she knew, a bad mistake. But it was too late to rectify it.

She stuffed the papers back into the pouch. She gestured again towards Fleming's chair with her pistol. And--

"Read," she said again

The trader read. There were copies of orders made by the Corporation, of acknowledgments made by its agents. There were the originals of both orders and acknowledgments. And there was a signed, witnessed statement made by Fergus, the skipper of Aphrodite, admitting the part that he had played in arming the Swamplanders. It was damning evidence, incontrovertible, telling a tale of a system in which profit took precedence over human work, wealth and happiness. The papers could have been forgeries. They could have been lies coming from the rebel propaganda machine. But Fleming could not convince himself of this. The story they told tallied too well with scores of little, hitherto unrelated facts stowed away in the odd corners of his brain, that had

ll never, until now, been brought out into the light, had never been recognized as being the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The trader read on, his brow furrowed, his whole attitude that of a man whose gods are gone, who has no gods with which to replace them. And Elspeth Van Dusen stuffed the other papers into her wallet, the banknotes, the millions of credits of Terran currency.

I was careless, she thought. I was a fool. But I am tired...

And she remembered the Spurling swooping down to the Port Lemaire landing field, the grey- uniformed figures of the Corporation police falling like ninepins before the fire from its guns. And they had boarded the Earth liner, and they had dragged Hoare out of his stateroom . . . It was a pity that he had been killed by the fire from his own men when they were running back to the Spurling... And there had been the Terran officers--some approving, others regarding her and her men as no better than bandits. The Captain had shouted about piracy and had threatened reprisals. The Purser had needed no urging at pistol point to make him open the safe...

And unexpected reinforcements of police had arrived, and Morrison and Blake, who had left the Spurling against her orders, had been killed, and a withering fire had swept the landing field as they were running to the plane, and they had all been killed. . . . Excepting herself. And she had got the Spurling up, and the police had opened fire with one of the anti-aircraft batteries. Their shooting had been wild--but they had scored what was almost a

direct hit on the turret drive.

SHE HAD realized, then, that she could never hope to make Port Lanning. She had headed for the coast. So far as she knew all the remaining posts were friendly. But before she could make Howard's Landing the drive had failed altogether... She did not care to dwell upon the flight through the jungle, the throbbing, insistent drums on all sides, the nagging, panic-inducing memory of what had been done to the wife of the Taylor's Bay trader, the mutilated corpse and the flies, the fact that she and her partisans had arrived too late to save, and before the scavenger worms had done their cleansing work...

And the fingers of her left hand beat a little, soft rhythm on the arm of her chair, a staccato melody that was in time with the faint, distant throbbing, brought by some shift of wind or freak of conductivity, as drum called to drum from peals to unpretentious peak, as drum answered drum from island to island, all down along the stragglng length of the archipelago. And she smiled, and her hand went down to caress the wallet at her belt, the money that was to be the price of ultimate victory. And to her the distant drums were the rattle of small arms, the thud of explosives, as Venusburg fell to the rebels and to the Corporation police under Colonel Hendaye--who could be bought . . .

Fleming heard the sound. He looked up. And he remembered, illogically, a girl in Venusburg. She had been, he recalled, a queer kid. She had liked poetry. It never occurred to him that, had the dice been thrown a little differently, she herself might have been a poet. And, one night in her rooms, he had picked up a book, little, bound in limp leather. And in a spirit of derision he had started to read--and had fallen under the spell of the tinkling quatrains, the philosophy of hedonism that they expounded. How did it go?

12 . . . Then take the Cash, and let the Credit go-- Nor heed the Music of a Distant Drum...

A distant drum. Arise, ye prisoners of starvation... Comes the Red Dawn... Oh yeah?

And he looked at the girl. He saw that she was half dreaming, that she was seeing and hearing things outside his range of vision, of comprehension. And such was the longing intensity of her thoughts that they half communicated themselves to him, carried by the quivering air. He sensed dimly who and what she was. And the half-realization brought him no closer to knowing her, no nearer to sympathy; coloured his feelings only with scorn and derision.

Then take the Cash and let the Credit go . . .

CHAPTER IV of Firebrand!

CREDIT... Where did it get you? The Van Dusen who had been the first on Venus had received the credit for his actions--and had died a poor and broken man. This Van Dusen who hoped to be the liberator of Venus... Perhaps the history of the future would ring with her praises but what would her life be? Danger, the continual struggle against adversaries and, should the times become more stable, arduous, unremitting toil until the end. The only true happiness for a woman was in the home, with children, in the service of the stronger sex. Even the Venusburg girls got more from life than she did . . .

And the little fool must have a cool million in good Earth credits in her wallet. And she would take them to Rebel Headquarters, or the Central Committee, or whatever they called themselves, in Port Lanning and say: Look what a good girl am I. And they would pat her on the head and chase her out on some other scatterbrained mission...

The money belonged to the Corporation. That much was obvious; no other individual or group of individuals on Venus possessed such huge sums of ready cash. It had been stolen. But that had been the fault of other servants of the Corporation, not himself. Besides--by arming the natives the Corporation had forfeited the allegiance of every right-thinking man. And if he should rob the thief, deprive her of her spoils, he would be rendering a signal service to his

employers. It would mean that arms from neutral Earth could not be purchased, that high government officials could not be bribed.

And that was the only service that the Corporation could now expect of him.

Once in Venusburg--and one of those notes would smooth his way to Home, would buy his passage to distant Earth...

The sound of the drums came louder, louder, beating in from the jungle, breaking against the thick walls of the post like the breakers of a long, heavy swell rolling in unchecked from the

13 other side of the world, rising and falling, setting the very air a-shake so that visual images seemed to shiver as if seen over a flame.

The two in the room roused from their reveries, looked at each other with something akin to intimacy, drawn together in a strange, sexless union by the bond of common fear. And the alarm bells shrilled, and sharp, distinct, above the rhythmic throbbing came the rattle of musketry.

The trader was first to his feet. He ran out of the door, up the stairs to the cupola on the roof. And when he got there his searchlights were blazing, and the ugly snouts of his guns were swinging from side to side in small arcs, the noses of small, bloodthirsty animals smelling out the prey. And the edge of the jungle, to the south and the east and the west, was alive with little, twinkling points of flame, with the ragged volley fire of the Swamplanders, kept under some semblance of control by the mission-educated savages who were the Corporation's officers.

"Take the eastern sector!" shouted Fleming.

The girl obeyed mutely. And her guns, and the trader's to the west, were answering fire with fire, were replying to rifle bullets with three-quarter-inch explosive tracer. To the south, where the guns were still under full automatic control, the tide of attack surged out from the jungle, across the swampland. And so far it came, and crossed the invisible line drawn and measured by the electronic fire control gear--and the southern guns added their stammering clamour to that of the manned weapons.

Fleming swung his guns around in a great arc to sweep the flank of the broken attack; on the other side of the cupola the girl did the same.

"It always works!" shouted the trader, his face aflame with the berserk joy of killing. The Van Dusen girl did not reply. Her face was serious. She killed efficiently, of necessity, and took no pleasure of it. She deplored the slaughter of those who should have been her allies, registered it in her mind as another crime for which the Corporation would have to answer.

FAR TO THE south the jungle was lit by a flash, a gout of vivid orange that flamed on the underside of the low overcast. Seconds later came a screaming roar that passed overhead, that receded rapidly, that culminated in a pillar of fire and smoke and high-flung spray in the sullen sea. The crash of the bursting shell came seconds before the thud of the gun. To the east was another flash, and to the west two more. The shells fell short and wide; the gun to the south fired again and it, too, was short.

Fleming tried elevating his own weapons, tried to attain the range of the Swamplanders' artillery, but it was useless. The girl saw this even before the first tracer were falling, all of a mile short, into the dark jungle.

She said: "It's hopeless. And it's only a matter of time before they get the range, before they blow the fort to smithereens . . ."

14 "Artillery..." muttered the trader bitterly. "They gave them artillery. They never gave me anything heavier than a machine gun..."

His voice was hurt, complaining, and it was obvious that the nature of the armament issued to the natives had utterly destroyed whatever vestiges of

loyalty to the Corporation that were left in his mind. He--an Earthman--could be trusted only with relatively light automatic weapons. Those over whom he had been given dominion had been entrusted with the power of gods; the means, the ability, to strike and maim and slay over a distance measured in miles, not in yards.

"This launch of yours," the girl's, voice was urgent, "where is it?"

"The boathouse by the jetty . . . "

He loosed off another futile burst at the distant guns, winced as a shell seemed barely to skim the cupola, as another burst hard against the southern wall of the post. He looked almost reproachfully at the weapons that had been the symbols of, the means of enforcing, his authority. He threw the switch that would put them all on full automatic control, at the command of the deadly accurate but indiscriminating brain whose sense organs rotated ceaselessly and tirelessly atop the cupola. Not looking back, not looking at the girl, he stumbled down the stairs. And as the girl followed there was a burst of fire from all guns as a fresh attack burst out from the fringe of the jungle; advanced, wavered; withered as it crossed the invisible line measured and drawn by the electronic fire control.

WHEN SHE GOT down into the post the trader was packing a bag, throwing into it clothing, photographs, the last carton of cigarettes, the last bottle of whisky. He did not look at her, but glanced hurriedly around what had been his home, making last decisions outside the range of her knowledge, her experience, as to what was to be crammed somehow into the bag, what was to be left for the slimy fingers of the Swamplanders. He plucked a photograph of one of the Venusburg beauties from the wall, placed it, not without care, on top of his other possessions, pulled the zipper of the bag shut with a decisive gesture. And he started for the door, the bulging container bumping his legs. The girl followed.

Outside the air was hot, humid, lit by the flicker of gunfire, by the flare of close bursting shells, by reflected light from the searchlights on the cupola that were still, like the antennae of some monstrous insect, swaying and dipping, vaguely questing. And like that of swift flying insects was the passage past their heads of singing bullets as unseen marksmen on the jungle verge, handicapped by the flickering, flaring, shifting light, tried their hardest to pick them off; as Death sighed and passed them by.

They were more than half way to the boathouse when the girl ran two or three steps forward, caught up to the trader, clutched his arm.

"What?" he demanded roughly.

"The northern guns in the cupola. Are they on automatic control?"

15 He stopped, swayed as the raised, forward-swinging right foot was checked abruptly, was lowered gingerly to a place beside its fellow.

"I forgot..." he stammered.

"Then you'd better go back and switch off."

Fleming turned, looked at the post, black against the beams of its own drums. searchlights, against the brief, eyesearing flare of the bursting shells. And as he watched a whole corner of the squat, square building was torn away, was dissolved in the incandescent blast of high explosive. And the next shells fell wide, proving that the hit had been more a matter of luck than skill.

"You'll have to go," she said. And the unsteady light gleamed on the metallic object in her hand, the gun with which she was prepared to enforce her commands.

"But . . . "

And then the argument was settled. A shell landed fair and square on the cupola. And the searchlights went out, and the guns were dead, and there was nothing whatsoever to hinder the inevitable rush from the jungle.

And as the trader fumbled with the lock of the boathouse door the drums were beating with a note of triumph, were closing in from all sides, their

staccato melody enhanced by the noise of the ragged, random volleys that, abruptly, ceased. The Swamplanders liked to take their prisoners alive if possible. And there were precious minutes wasted whilst the trader set the gyro compass of the launch to the dock heading, waited until the flywheel was revolving with sufficient speed. And more minutes were lost when the crew had to be cleared of the hastily slipped stern line; and the boathouse landward door was already going down before the battering rams when the launch surged out through the seaward entrance, trampled beneath her sharp forefoot those who had swum out and around to cut her off. And the rifles opened up again, and the bullets threw up goutts of spray, sang with a high, keen note as they struck the smooth plastic of hull and upperworks, the metal of fittings, and glanced off.

And then they were out to sea, into the darkness, under the cover of a welcome and opportune bank of mist; followed only by the menacing, yet fading, throb and rattle of the drums.

CHAPTER V of Firebrand!

IT WAS hot in the pilot room of the launch. The windows were down, and the wind, created by the motion of the craft, swept through, presented an unconvincing illusion of coolness. And the sun, climbing slowly towards the meridian, no more than a diffused blur behind the mists, the eternal overcast, added to the humidity with every degree of altitude gained.

16 Normally, this would not have worried the Venus-born Elspeth Van Dusen. This was her world, and she loved it; and to her Earth, with its clear skies, its winds cool more often than not even in the Tropics, would have been as uninviting as is Mars to the Earth-born.

But she was tired.

With Fleming she was keeping watch and watch, but her watch below had been a matter of fitful, uneasy slumber, broken by the efforts of the trader to force the bolted door into the cabin, by the shrilling of the alarm bells when a school of the huge, Venusian flying fishes attacked, by the hectic, eventful minutes she had spent behind the launch's machine gun whilst Fleming maneuvered the little ship.

And tiring, too, was the strain of keeping a constant check upon the trader's every action, of making sure that he was keeping the launch headed Nor' West for Port Lanning and not North by West for Venusburg. When she had first come on watch she had obtained observations--a position line by magnetic dip, crossed by a line of soundings as they passed over the Clarendon Deep. As yet Fleming was playing square. Whether he would continue to do so she doubted. But she carried the means--her hand went down to holster--to enforce his unwilling loyalty to the rebel cause. And she carried in the wallet at her side that which would have seduced many a man from his allegiance even to a cause in which he most passionately believed . . .

THE LAUNCH slid through the oily water, the hot mists, as smoothly and easily as something in a dream. And some shift of wind, some freak of conductivity, brought quivering life to the humid air; low, on the borderline of the senses rhythmically monotonous, drum called to drum from peak to insignificant peak, drum answered drum from island to low island, all down along the stragglng length of the archipelago. And the sound that should have been a warning of danger, that should have brought alertness, lulled; and the ticking steering repeater, the ever so slightly wavering line drawn by the course recorder on its slowly revolving drum, swam giddily before the girl's eyes as she strove desperately to keep her heavy lids from falling. She thought that it would be wise to cut out the automatic pilot, to take the wheel herself. But to raise her hand to the switch was too much effort. She started the movement--and slumped down in the chair. And she did not stir when the door of the cabin behind her opened silently and slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time. But when

the soft lead piping in the trader's hands struck the back of her neck, she jerked convulsively.

He thought at first that he had killed her, but then he saw that she was breathing. She would have to die anyway, of course, some time before Venusburg. He had relinquished all thought of claiming the bounty on her dead body for, large as the reward was, it was small compared with the bills that he now pulled, with avid hands, from her wallet.

Alive, she would talk. She would remain silent, if possible, about the plans, the secrets, of the Central Committee of the revolution. But regarding his theft of what had already been stolen, she would need no urging. Dead--and they would wonder what had become of the huge sum that Hoare had been taking to Earth.

So she would have to go...

17 But first... He felt the compulsion to assert his masculinity, to prove to his own satisfaction that this servant of the dialectic, of forces outside his limited comprehension, was, after all, just another woman. And so he found some strong cord in the pilothouse locker, and he lashed her securely, then dragged her down to the cabin. He threw her on to one of the bunks, returned to the control post.

And there he busied himself briefly with chart and parallel rules and dividers, laid off the course that would bring the launch to the Venusburg approaches. The steering repeater clicked rapidly as the bows swung round to the new heading. And that was all that, to the eye, was changed. There was still the same hot mist, clinging to the oily surface of the water, blowing in stifling clouds through the open windows; the same flickers of the little red light on the alarm panel as the radar, the asdic, picked up dangers that were too far away to be an immediate menace. Fleming pondered briefly on the strangeness of Venusian evolution, on the fact that no indigenous life form possessed organs, senses, to serve in lieu of sight under such conditions as these. But the theory--of which he had briefly and disinterestedly read--of recent vulcanism did not mean anything to him. All that he felt was a dim thankfulness to something vague and far astray, a gratitude for the more than even chance he had been given to bring the launch to Venusburg singlehanded.

WHEN Elspeth Van Dusen woke up the first thing she saw was Fleming. He was looking at her, his eyes hot and greedy. And tendrils of the fog had followed him down the short companionway to the cabin, were eddying around the room, were sucked up into the column of hot air that was rising above the master gyro compass.

For some reason this seemed to have a significance greater, even, than her present predicament. But she ignored the behavior of the fog in the convection currents, the splitting headache, the vile taste in her mouth. She looked straight at the trader, felt a sense of ascendancy as his eyes shifted uneasily.

But she knew that it was an empty, meaningless victory. She knew that at any moment now her body would go down into the hot sea, to be wrangled over by the ferocious fish-lizards, the tentacular, deadly horrors that defied classification.

And while she stared steadily at the man, she fell a prey to self pity. It was hard that it should all have to end like this. Not so much the death--that comes to all--but the shame, the ignominy. For this, she had killed, had pirated the Terran spaceliner, had fled across De Kuyper's Land with the shells of the Corporation anti-aircraft batteries bursting close under her stern. And the fruits of her piracy, the price of the lives of her men and those of the police, the bribe that was to have bought Colonel Hendaye and his regiment, now became this despicable man's, to fritter away as he wished--

The alarm bells suddenly shrilled, and there was a dull shock as the launch struck something solid but yielding, heeled sharply as her keel scraped over the obstruction. And Fleming ran up the steps, and there was the sound of rapid

machine gun fire, then silence, then more bursts.

18 The girl grinned. It sounded as though the trader had his hands full. It seemed that he must have run straight into a basking school of the big fish-lizards. And she allowed herself to hope.

When the launch heeled over it had rolled her out of the bunk. And she stretched, experimentally, and found that she could still move her legs, that she could roll over the quivering deck. And she found that, from a supine position, she could lift her feet and, even with both ankles bound, manipulate the catches of the binnacle doors with her toes. It does not take long in the telling--but in the doing it was an arduous, delicate operation, not without pain.

And it was especially painful when she pressed her bare foot against the end bearing casing of the gyroscope. And presently there was the smell of scorching flesh, of burning skin, added to that of hot lubricating oil. And the instrument precessed inside its binnacles rotated clockwise on its vertical axis, and the automatic pilot faithfully followed it. And the straight line drawn on the chart did not waver in its straightness, and as far as Fleming would know--for he, as the frequent bursts of machine gun fire testified, was not overly interested in navigation--the launch was still hugging closely the rhumb line to Venusburg.

And the time came when Elspeth Van Dusen could bear the pain no longer. But she was satisfied that she had achieved her object. She could see the chart, the position she had obtained when she came on watch, and the pencilled course line running--even when steering for Port Lanning-- within a few miles of the westernmost islands of the archipelago. She was confident that--unless the fog should lift--the launch would ground. And she was sure that the fish-lizards would not easily abandon the pursuit. And for a man to be engaged in a running fight and, simultaneously, to be concerned with the safe navigation of his vessel is almost an impossibility. Especially when his trust is pinned to untrustworthy instruments...

She contrived to shut the binnacle doors, wincing when she brought pressure to bear upon her scorched and blistered feet. She rolled and wriggled back to a position just under the bunk, to the place, as nearly as she could remember, to which she had been thrown when the launch heeled. And she lay, relaxed, awaiting the inevitable grounding, reserving her strength for whatever emergencies might arise. What they would be she had no way of foretelling--she could only guess. And unless she fell alive into the hands of the Venusians, her fate, no matter which way the dice fell, could be no worse than that which was already in store for her.

CHAPTER VI of Firebrand!

SHE WAS not asleep--although she was not far from it--when the launch grounded. The stranding came in the middle of a prolonged burst of machine gun fire from the deck. And in the interval, the long interval, between the first shock and the reversing of the engines, the powerful machinery of the launch had had time to push her well up on to the beach.

And whilst the engines were still going astern the machine gun opened up once more. Then there was silence, save for the vibration of the straining screw, and Fleming came down the

19 companionway. He had a knife in his hand. Hypnotized, the girl stared at the gleaming blade, wondered if she had miscalculated, if her plans had miscarried.

The trader said nothing. And as he approached she saw that the light in his

eyes was that of fear rather than hate. And she heard, above the throbbing of the screw, the sound of drums as the Swamplanders' coastal look-out signalled to their comrades inland the intelligence that a ship had grounded.

You'll have to help me," he said. "You'll have to cover me with the gun while I run an anchor out astern. The fish-lizards are still waiting for us in deeper water, and the Swamplanders know that we're here . . . "

"Suppose I say no?"

"You won't. You daren't. You told me what they did to the Williamson woman."

"But... I can't trust you."

"And I can't trust you. When I'm carrying out the anchor you'll be pointing a machine gun at my back... His voice was appealing. "Can't you see? We've got to trust each other."

"Have we? When you've got my pistol and a couple of million of Earth credits tucked into your belt . . ."

"The money? Look--" his tone was reasonable--"suppose we split fifty-fifty?"

"And you land me at Port Lanning--and give me back my gun. . ."

And whilst they bargained, desperately, the noise of the drums swelled, drew closer. And with much unsettled he stashed with his knife, freed her for the part that she was to play towards his-- and her own?--salvation. And he tried to hurry her when she flexed cramped limbs, when she insisted on adjusting her dress, hunting for and putting on her sandals. And the drums were very close when they finally went on deck, and their appearance was greeted by a ragged volley of rifle fire, and they could hear the saurians drawing too much water, they were, to venture into the shallows--splashing and snorting and hissing only a few yards away, but hidden from view by the sea fog.

Over the land it was relatively clear. They could see the wall of the jungle verge looming through the mist, passably distinct, but distorted, seemingly a sky-scraping cliff. And they could see the horde that was pouring from the jungle, spilling out over the marshland. And drum called to drum along the broad front of the attackers; drum answered drum from the swampy beach to the low hills inland, beyond the jungle. And there was a drum in the sky, too; a curiously regular beat that swelled as it came up from the south, that passed rapidly overhead, above the low overcast; that died to a droning mutter in the north.

20 Elspeth Van Dusen ran to the machine gun. She swung the weapon in a wide arc, ignoring the bullets that went whining by on invisible wings. And the staccato song of the heavy gun was added to that of the Swamplanders' drums, of their ragged, irregular volleys. And as she fired she found time to wonder why their own machine guns, their artillery, were never in evidence, were called in only when all else had failed. Perhaps, she thought, anything more powerful, more deadly, than a rifle is, somehow, sacred, is to be used only after prayer and fasting... And her lips curled in a thin line of amusement as she watched her tracer, bright in the dull, hazy air, sweep the Swamplanders' front, watched the attack surge back like a spent wave.

"Cover the sea!" shouted Fleming.

HE WAS in the shallow water--only up to his knees, it was, and he had slung over his shoulder the anchor from the starboard hawsepipe. And he had thrown the windlass out of gear so that, as he waded aft, the chain rattled slowly out of the locker. And as he saw the girl looking at him he took one hand from his burden, gestured down to the wallet at his belt. "It's all here, he cried. "So I'd better come back . . ."

The girl thought: I suppose so. But it's a pity. The brute is too strong--there aren't many men who could carry that anchor out... And he's still got my gun... But I'm playing for my life as much as the money--and if he does break his bargain he'll have our agents on Earth to deal with... If I'm alive to tip them off. . .

And she loosed off a burst to warn off the saurians that were still splashing and hissing and grunting in the fog just outside the shallows; and she swung the gun rapidly to deal with a fresh attack that came surging out of the jungle.

The rattling of the cable over the gypsies of the windlass ceased. She looked behind her, her finger still on the trigger of the gun, her tracer still sweeping the jungle verge, and saw Fleming wading back. She saw the muscles of his torso bulge as he hoisted himself over the gunwale. And then he went to the windlass, threw it in gear, started the motor that would, he hoped, heave the launch clear of the sand bar.

From the north came the sound of the strange drum in the sky again. And from the jungle the Swamplanders' drums answered, drowning it in a great wave of sound. And the machine gun jammed as the forward swinging breech block pulled a defective round in two, jammed the projectile into the chamber and dropped the battered cartridge case into the recoil-actuated mechanism. Fleming looked up at the abrupt cessation of the sound that was to him, to both of them, a song of hope--then began to heave fast and yet faster at his sternwards leading cable.

The chain tightened, the links rattled over the gypsies, down into the chain locker. And the launch did not move. It was obvious that the anchor had failed to take hold, was dragging through the soft sand of the bottom.

With cold desperation Elspeth Van Dusen worked to clear the jammed gun. She forced herself to forget all else but the intricacy of interacting working parts, the bent and battered cartridge case, the propellant scattered over the mechanism, the round in the chamber. And she got it working,

21 and she loosed off the first burst at the onrushing Swamplanders--had it not been their intention to take the man and the girl alive their rifle fire, inaccurate though it was, would have accounted for them long since--and suddenly realised that the drum in the sky was overpoweringly loud.

Swooping down at them was a jet plane. She recognised it as one of those, fitted with a primitive, fixed drive, that had been turned out in the Corporation's workshops at Port Lemaire. On the underside of the short, stubby wings was a golden, rayed sun--the insignia of the Corporation. And from the guns in its nose a stream of shells drew a line of angry fire and smoke across the wet sand, straight for the launch. And she saw the vaned, black shape detach itself from the plane's belly, fall with deceptive slowness. She threw herself prone behind her gun, waited long seconds for the burst--and knew that the falling bomb must, inevitably, take her for its target.

SHE SAT up, coughing and retching. The acrid fumes of high explosive were a bitter poison in her lungs. And when the deck heaved gently beneath her she knew that this was only an effect of the nausea, the shock.

She opened her eyes.

The deck--only scarred by the shells from the Corporation plane's guns, by the splinters from its bomb--was heaving. Blast is a freakish thing. In this case it had lifted the launch and thrown it into the deeper water just clear of the sand bar.

The windlass motor was still running. And the anchor lifted from the bottom, rattled against the bows, jammed in the hawsepipe. The windlass strained and complained. The girl ran forward, switched off, realised that Fleming was not on board.

Fleming was where the launch had been. He was stretched supine on the grey sand. Blood from the gasping wound in his side turned the sand from grey to black. But he was not dead. He stirred, tried to raise himself on one arm. He started to scream. And a murmurous background to the thin, pitiful sound was the fast diminishing thunder of the drive of the Corporation ship, the mutter of distant drums from the jungle, where the Swamplanders had retreated.

Throwing the windlass out of gear, the girl let go the anchor. She dived, struck out for the beach. After a few strokes she found bottom, was able to walk, to splash and struggle through the warm, muddy water. And then she was standing over Fleming. He looked up at her, and stopped screaming. He looked at

her as though she was the most beautiful thing in his world. And then the expression on his face faded, was replaced by a horrified incredulity as she knelt beside him, undid the fastenings of his belt, stood erect with the belt and the wallet and the holster in her hands.

When she was buckling it around her own waist--such was her relief at recovering the twice stolen money that she did not think to step back out of reach--he clutched her leg.

"You can't leave me!" he cried. "You can't! You can't!"

22 Dispassionately she looked down at him. She saw the wound in his side, the splinters of white bone protruding from the bloody, pulped flesh. She knew that she, with the aid of the medical kit carried by the launch, could never hope to save his life. And that his life was not worth saving. She felt no sense of loyalty, of obligation. Accident had made them members of the same species but that was all.

She tried to break away, but he clung to her. His fingers bruised the flesh of her ankle. And when she attempted to walk towards the water, the waiting launch, she only succeeded in dragging him a scant inch or so over the sand. She stopped, then, stood listening to the drums, to the staccato melody that told that the Venusians, frightened off by the display of Terran power, were mustering their courage for a last attack. She kicked, hard, with her free foot. The trader whimpered, the tears ran down his face, but he did not relax his hold.

She pulled the pistol from its holster. Fleming cried out when he saw the ugly weapon, started to scream again. And the crashing report drowned his high, thin shrieking, and his grip on the girl's ankle relaxed and she pulled clear and stood, for a brief second, looking down at the sprawling, ungraceful body. There was no pity on her face. There was a faint shadow of what could have been regret. She was remembering the bodies she had seen--and the disgust, and the bitter, impotent grief and rage--when the rebels stormed Palmer's Ford, over-ran the defences that had been hastily thrown up around the Corporation prison there. She remembered the torture room of the Corporation police. Her own lover had been among those who had been put to death there. He had died, at last, only an hour or so before the surprise attack.

And she was sorry that this loyal servant of the Corporation had died a swift, clean death by her gun instead of a mere lingering one under the Swamplanders' knives.

But it couldn't be helped.

And as she waded out through the shallows the drums swelled to a crescendo, and the first of the fresh attack was advancing on broad, webbed feet over the marsh.

WHEN THE ship loomed out of the thinning mists--there was no warning, for all the electronic equipment had been put out of commission by the explosion--she put the wheel hard over, turned to run. Then she saw the ripple of red at the stranger's gaff recognised the high forecastle head, the bridge set well aft, the twin rocket batteries at the bow. It could only be Madrilen--late Aphrodite of the Corporation's service. And when the rocket roared from one of the auxiliary cruiser's bow projectors, burst in the water just forward of the launch's stem, she had already stopped, had thrown the engines into reverse.

She lit the last of Fleming's precious cigarettes, sat quietly and waited, grateful for the respite, for the opportunity to let responsibility fall on other shoulders than her own. The Odyssey that had started at the Port Lemaire landing field, in far away De Kuyper's Land, was at last finished.

And some shift of wind, some freak of conductivity, brought quivering life to the hot, humid air; a peak to unpretentious peak...

23 . . . and she smiled, and her hand went down with a caressing motion to

the wallet at her belt. In her mind the staccato melody was the rattle of small arms, the thud of explosions, as Venusburg fell to the combined forces of the rebels and Colonel Hendaye's police. But that would not be the end. It would only be a beginning...

. . . while drum answered distant drum from island to island, all down along the low, stragglng length of the archipelago....