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FEATURING

THE SEVEN  
SLEEPERS

A Complete

Carlisle-Quade Novel

By HENRY KUTTNER

and ARTHUR K. BARNES



# "The Seven Sleepers"

with Arthur K. Barnes

**Henry Kuttner**

Published in Thrilling Wonder Stories, Vol. 16, No. 2 (May 1940).  
Incorporated as "Almussen's Comet" (part 4 of 5)  
in the fix-up novel Interplanetary Hunter, Gnome Press: 1956.

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# Chapter I.

## Call of the Comet

The great lens in the Mount Everest Observatory had withstood the stresses of the coldest climate and the highest altitude on Earth. Nobody had foreseen that Gerry Carlyle would ever use it. But when she did, the baleful gleam in her eye was enough to chip the telescope's beryllium steel.

Gerry was mad. She had flown into a fury to keep from crying. As Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle, the Solar System's greatest explorer, she dared never in her own estimation, be considered guilty of feminine weaknesses. What she wanted, she got, by virtue of a keen, alert, indomitable courage, and experience that covered practically every one of the Sun's planets.

Now, watching on the huge telescope visiplat the glowing fires of Almussen's Comet, she realized that she was losing the biggest scoop of her wild career.

The worst of it was that Gerry needed that scoop. The London Zoo paid her chiefly on commission. But she had to provide good, regular salaries for her staff. And she had never saved much, for there was always new equipment to buy, expensive research to pay for. The upkeep of The Ark alone was staggering. For months now Gerry hadn't found a new monster. The Ark was being completely overhauled and modernized, and money was getting low.

The last factor didn't bother her too much. She had to provide for her men, of course, but the real danger was losing her commission. She hated the idea of being idle in her beloved job when all the monsters in the System had not yet been captured and caged. The thrill of

pitting her brain against the resources of alien worlds and incredible beings to bring them back to the Zoo alive, the excitement of skirting the brink of death and coming back unscathed, meant everything to her.

Now one of the greatest enigmas of interplanetary deep space was coming within reach. But Gerry couldn't move. She was earthbound as the most amazing scientific adventure of her lifetime was thundering into the void as Almussen's Comet swept Sunward.

Right now Gerry stood motionless in the middle of the room, which didn't much resemble an observatory. It was a small, well-furnished cubicle, the duplicate of a dozen others, each equipped with a visiplat connected with the gigantic telescope. She looked bitterly at the pallid fires of the comet, and could have stamped in frustrated annoyance.

A small televisior in the corner buzzed. "Calling Miss Carlyle.... Call from London...."

The woman swung toward the device and touched a switch. On the screen, a man's worried face appeared.

"Well?" Gerry snapped.

"I'm terribly sorry," the face said apprehensively. "But the Jan Hallek Mercury expedition can't possibly be back for at least a month. And even then his ship would have to be overhauled thoroughly and specially adapted for your purposes and--"

Furiously, Gerry switched off the communicator. She resumed her pacing, cursing a fate that seemed to chain her to the Earth, at the same time the greatest opportunity of her lifetime sailed nonchalantly past through the skies, never to return.

Occasionally the televisor buzzed, and apologetic faces reported more sad news. Then the door opened and a tall, dark young man entered. He looked hot and harassed as he slung his dress cap halfway across the room and dropped into an easy chair.

"Well, Captain Strike?" Gerry's razor tongue sliced out. "Before you fall asleep, you might inform me of your progress."

Tommy Strike grinned wryly. "You know the answer, kitten--"

"Don't call me kitten."

"Cat," Tommy amended. "The Ark is absolutely out of the picture. Every motor in her hull's been torn completely apart, for checking over. She won't be going anywhere for a long, long time.... And, by the way, I can see you're in an evil temper."

"I'm not!"

"So let me warn you not to take it out on me, because I'm not feeling very gay myself. On the slightest provocation, I'm going to turn you over my knee and give you a whaling."

Gerry glanced keenly at the usually easy-going Tommy, and decided that he meant what he said. She smiled ruefully, and turned as the door opened once more.

A small man, with a face like a pallid prune, came in. Spectacles glinted from amid the wrinkles. A badly fitting toupee was askew on the head of Professor Langley of the Mount Everest Observatory.

"Um, Miss Carlyle," said Langley, in a squeaky voice. "I have collected the data you desired." He referred to a scrap of paper clutched in one hand, and began to read in a swift, monotonous voice. "Almussen's Comet is one of the largest ever to enter the



Solar System. Its nucleus is eight thousand miles, almost as large as that of Donati's Comet of Eighteen Fifty-eight. And it seems to be much denser, probably dense enough to support the weight of a human being."

"Tommy!" Gerry's eyes were alight with excitement. "Do you hear?"

Strike nodded slowly, frowning. He realized that this information only made it harder for Gerry, because she couldn't take advantage of it.

"Um. The nucleus is not quite as large as our own Moon. The comet seems to be one of the long period comets, or perhaps a wanderer of space, not a part of our System at all. In other words"--even Langley's cold voice was pained--"we shall never see its return in our lifetimes."

Gerry chewed her lip. Strike glanced at her and then quickly looked away.

"Cyanogen is present in great quantities, also sodium, common metals, such as iron and bauxite, and the hydrocarbons."

"Hydrocarbons," Gerry said. "That may mean--life."

Langley knitted his brows. "On a comet? Rather fantastic, Miss Carlyle."

"I've run across life-forms existing in much less probable conditions," the woman said stubbornly.

"And how would you reach the comet?" Langley asked.

"How do you suppose?" Gerry asked defiantly. "Crawl on my hands and knees?" But her voice was bitter--hurt and bewildered by her helplessness.





# Chapter II.

## A Challenge for Gerry

Langley permitted himself the luxury of a faint smile.

"It would take a specially equipped ship. Comets don't only shine by reflected light. The Sun's light and electron streams also excite their tenuous gases. But more important, they are electrically charged. You must have protection against the electronic bombardment of the coma--which is much larger than the nucleus. A head may be from eighteen thousand to a million, nine hundred thousand miles in diameter, while the nucleus is from four hundred forty yards to eight thousand miles. It would be like entering the Sun's chromosphere."

"Not quite," Gerry said thoughtfully. "It could be done. Am I right?"

The professor pondered. "Yes," he admitted at last. "It might be done. And there might be life on the comet. But if so, it would be so utterly alien, that it would be incomprehensible to a human being."

"What a scoop," Gerry murmured ecstatically.

Repelled by this unscientific attitude Langley withdrew, ostentatiously shutting the door behind him. The woman turned to Strike.

"I know," he said. "It's tough. Not a ship in the System--" He stopped suddenly.

"No," Gerry sighed defeatedly. "Nothing. And no time to prepare one. Not a crate that would take us to the comet."

"Mm-m." Strike unpocketed a battered pipe and sucked at it, an enigmatic expression on his space-tanned face.

For a moment there was silence, while Gerry leaned back to scrutinize her man.

"Why the reticence?" she asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact there is a big ship being prepared to tackle the comet. I heard of it in a roundabout way. Supposed to be kept secret till the takeoff. Then there'll be a great fanfare of publicity."

Gerry clutched Strike's shoulders.

"Why, you.... Why didn't you say so before? Who's handling it? I'll get in touch with 'em right away...."

She paused. Tommy had mentioned a fanfare of publicity. He had been reluctant to broach the matter at all. A horrible suspicion seeped into her mind.

"Good Lord!" she cried. "Don't tell me Nine Planets Pictures is disrupting my life again."

Tommy Strike stood up.

"Now look, kitten. There's no use losing your temper."

"Well, blast me," was all Gerry said. But she made it sound like a searing oath.

"In fact, it might be a good idea to swallow your pride and make a deal with 'em. It's your only chance."

"Oh, is that so?" Gerry snapped. "Hollywood on the Moon. Nine Planets Films, Incorporated. The biggest bunch of crooked fakers in the System. They duplicate the life-forms I've captured at the risk of

my life--Venusian whips, Jovian thunderdragons. And how do they do it? They make cheap robots. Radio-controlled robots at that. That's what gets in my hair, Tommy. I take all the risks, and they grab the credit and the cash."

"They make good pictures," Strike said. That was a tactical mistake.

"Good?" Gerry almost sputtered. "Corny, you mean. You can't duplicate life-forms even with biologically created robots. But the public goes to Nine Planets' pictures and stays away from the London Zoo. Do you think that's fair?"

"Oh, well," Strike soothed, "this Quade, the guy who's in charge isn't such a bad egg, from all I hear. He ought to be willing to give us a lift."

"Quade? Their ace trouble-shooter? The man who doublecrossed me by taking newsreel shots when I wasn't looking?" Gerry looked ready to explode. But, suddenly and inexplicably, she quieted. A gleam came into her eye.

"I see," she went on, after a pause. "Maybe you're right. Quade ought to be willing to give us a lift. And if he does--if I once get on that comet--" Gerry's smile became sweetly ferocious. "Mr. Quade will find out just what it means to be double-crossed."

Strike's jaw dropped. "Lord help Quade," he whispered under his breath. "Lord help him."

One day later, Gerry reached the Moon. She came unheralded, bursting upon the horizon of Nine Planets like a nova. Nobody was expecting her, and Tony Quade with his boss, Von Zorn, lolled unsuspectingly in a Turkish bath on Lunar Boulevard.

Everybody in the System wanted to visit Hollywood on the Moon, the

most glamorous, fascinating, incredible city ever built. It lay on the other side of the Moon, away from Earth, in a vast hollow that volcanic activity had blasted out eons before. There, nestled under the Great Rim, glowed and sparkled Hollywood on the Moon, Mecca of the Movie Makers. It had the advantages of a perfect artificial atmosphere and climate, which therefore made it vacation-land for the elite and the socialite. For the studio men, it was a place of arduous, grueling, but utterly interesting work.

Here Nine Planets Films, Inc. had its headquarters. Here the interplanetary sagas were plotted and planned by ingenious script writers. Here the technical experts consulted, the experimental labs created robot-life-forms and artificial other-worldly conditions. And here Von Zorn ruled like a czar. He was the President of Nine Planets and Tony Quade was his ace man. When Von Zorn was in a spot, when experts said a picture couldn't be canned, he sent for Quade. And Quade had always proved the experts wrong.

Quade was the one who got the first four-dimensional films ever made. He was the daredevil maniac who captured the spectacularly deadly Plutonian life-forms on celluloid. He even shot the great Martian Inferno, the hottest sro grosser in years. Against her will and without her knowledge, he had once filmed Gerry Carlyle. After Gerry Carlyle it was only a step to a comet.

Though Quade was worried, he didn't show it.

There was no point in explaining to Von Zorn that the chances of returning from the comet alive were practically zero.

Quade listened hard, peering through clouds of steam. The acrid stimulation of Martian sour-grass tickled his nostrils. Weirdly swathed figures loomed momentarily through thin spots in the mist, then disappeared. There were strangely muffled voices, heavy

breathing, the sound of wet feet slapping on glass-tile.

"And in the office it's spies everywhere," Von Zorn said excitedly. "Try to keep secrets with gossip columnists and fan mag writers searching like vultures, and slickers from the other companies trying to scoop us. A Turkish bath is the only place I feel safe.... Tony, we're set. The ship's almost ready. The special shields are done, and the equipment's being put in right on our own lot, the abandoned Thunder Men set near the Rim. But we've got to keep it quiet for awhile longer."

Quade's lanky, hard-muscled figure stirred uneasily. His lean, tanned face was impassive as he studied the remarkable form of his employer. Quade was trying not to laugh.

Von Zorn resembled two eggs, the smaller atop the larger, with strange, limp appendages sprouting in the form of arms and legs. He was as peculiar a life-form as Quade had ever filmed. No one would have guessed that inside that bristle-thatched head was one of the shrewdest executive brains of the System. Von Zorn dominated his whole gigantic plant, from the highest-paid star to the lowliest grip.

"Keep it quiet awhile longer," Von Zorn repeated. "Scientists, reporters, everybody in the Universe will want to go along the minute they find out that we're tackling the comet. We have to refuse 'em, and that makes bad publicity."

Von Zorn lived in terms of box-office receipts and publicity.

"When we do break the news, it's on the eve of the take-off," he continued. "No time for anybody to get their feelings hurt. See? Besides, this is a moving picture venture, Tony. You're going to get the pix of a lifetime. Sensational background for our super-epic of cosmic adventure--"



"Yeah. I know. Call of the Comet. Starring so-and-so. Produced by so-and-so. And maybe a tiny, buried screen credit for Quade, cameraman."

"No, I'm making you associate producer for this one," cried Von Zorn, on the spur of the moment. "Maybe director, too. Who knows? Your name in lights--"

A door opened somewhere, and a draught of cool air surged in.

"Mr. Von Zorn," a voice called. "Mr. Von Zorn!"

"Well?" Von Zorn yelled back, grateful for the interruption.

"There's a lady outside to see you. Says her name's Gerry Carlyle. That's what she says, honest."

Quade looked at Von Zorn. Von Zorn looked at Quade.

"Tell her I'm out," the film magnate yelped. "I'm speaking to nobody. I'm under a doctor's care. I'm a sick man!"

"She says if you ain't out in five minutes, she's comin' in," the attendant said apologetically. .

"She wouldn't dare," Von Zorn sputtered.

Quade suddenly intervened. "Don't kid yourself, Chief. That dame'll charge in here the way she walks into a pack of wild animals. We'd better take a shower and talk to her. Mr. Von Zorn's office in fifteen minutes," he said to the attendant.

"But get this straight, Chief," he said when they were comparatively alone again. "That rocket in skirts isn't going to join any expedition I'm running."

Gerry and Strike were waiting as Von Zorn and Quade, freshly groomed and still smelling faintly of sour-grass, entered. Von Zorn strutted around his vast desk and eyed Gerry across its glassy expanse as one might scout an enemy across a battlefield.

"Ah, Strike," he said. "Met you before, I think. Guess everyone knows everyone else except maybe you and Quade. Tony Quade, Strike."

As the two men advanced warily to shake hands, they looked each other over very carefully. They were well matched physically, though Quade was perhaps a bit taller. Despite himself, Strike couldn't help liking what he saw before him.

Gerry started the ball rolling. "You owe me a debt of gratitude, Mr. Von Zorn, for that affair of the energy-eaters. It's probably bad taste to mention it, but I'm desperate to get to Almussen's Comet while it's still possible to do so."

Von Zorn's simian face beamed at her proposal.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "We haven't always seen eye to eye in the past, Miss Carlyle, but bygones can be bygones. If you, Strike and a few of your men want to go along, it could be arranged."

Gerry rocked on her heels, jolted with amazement. This was too easy.

"You mean we can make a bargain?" she gasped.

"I mean I can make a bargain," Von Zorn amended shrewdly.

"Chief," Quade said urgently. "Remember what I told you."

Nobody paid him the slightest attention.

"All right," Gerry grudging. "You're calling the turn."

"Well, first off, this is a movie expedition. The idea is to take pictures. After we have our background shots for later double-exposures, it's okay to mess around. I don't think there's any organic life on the comet. But if there is, you're the woman who can catch what's there. You bring back two of each life-form you find there. One goes to Nine Planets, and the other to the London Zoo. But if you bring back only one specimen, it belongs to Nine Planets.

"It's for my own protection," Von Zorn went on. "Your exhibits have got the public down on my synthetic movie monsters. If there are any real ones to be had, I'm using them in Call of the Comet. That's how I'm going to overcome public prejudice--"

"Chief!" Quade broke in.

"I agree," Gerry said. Her eyes had taken on a keen glint. "Tommy, myself and six of my best men. We'll have our equipment ready within twenty-four hours."

Quade's mouth was a single hard line. "Chief, I want to talk to you," he began menacingly.

Von Zorn hesitated. When he glimpsed Tony's narrowed eyes, he nodded.

"All right. Will you excuse us, Miss Carlyle?"

The woman smiled brilliantly and left, with Strike. As the door shut, Quade turned blazing eyes on his employer.

"I quit," he stormed. "You can't double-cross me like that."

"Now, now." Von Zorn raised placating hands. "Don't jump to conclusions Tony. I have your best interests at heart. You know that."

"Yeah? I told you once that dame slides in, I step out."

"But why? You want to film this picture. It's the biggest break you've ever had. Your name as associate producer? No, I'll make it producer. Tony, I'll let you in on something. I've planned this all along-- to get Gerry Carlyle interested."

"What?" Quade demanded in horror.

"Sure. Figure it out. Think of the publicity when Gerry Carlyle goes on a Nine Planets expedition to the comet. Our picture will be the box office sock of the century. It'll break all records for that one reason alone. And you'll have the credit."

"I see," Quade said slowly. He rubbed his lean jaw and eyed Von Zorn. "Maybe.... Well, we'll see. I still don't trust you. You'd cut your grandmother's throat for the publicity. But I'm not going to stay here on the Moon and let Gerry Carlyle take over my job."

"I'd hate to put somebody else in your place," Von Zorn murmured gently.

"I get it. Okay, it's a deal. But I can tell you this right now. That Carlyle dame is out to doublecross me. I can smell it."

"Afraid of a woman?" Von Zorn taunted.

Quade smiled unpleasantly. "Afraid? Nope. I'm going to show Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle just what doublecrossing really means."

He went out. Von Zorn looked after his ace man and blinked. His simian face twisted into a wry grin.

"Lord help Gerry Carlyle!" he whispered under his breath.



# Chapter III.

## Oil and Water

As the hours dragged past, it became apparent that Gerry and Quade were mixing like oil and water. The chief bone of contention lay in the preparations for the voyage. Despite the huge size of the supership, every available inch would be utilized for equipment.

What sort of equipment?

Gerry had her own ideas. As an explorer of some experience, she knew the vital necessity of preparing for every contingency. Gas-guns, complicated snares and traps, special lures, weapons, protective devices, a hundred and one other gadgets were rushed from the woman's London headquarters through space to Hollywood on the Moon. Meanwhile, Quade grimly superintended the installation of special cameras, complicated lighting facilities, ranging from hydrocarbon to ultraviolet, cases of various lenses, telescopic, microscopic, spectroscopic, electroscopic....

"Hell," snapped Quade to Gerry as they stood in the ship's port, violently arguing. "The business is to film whatever's on Almussen's Comet. What's the use of all this junk of yours? Do you think we'll find dinosaurs?"

"We might," Gerry said maliciously. "And if we do, you'd look swell trying to down one with a camera. It doesn't pay to take chances in my business. You'll learn."

"Oh, I'll learn, will I?" Quade breathed hoarsely. "Listen, young lady, I was canning films from Venus to Pluto before you crawled out of your cradle."

This was a lie, but Gerry chose to take it seriously. Her blue eyes widened innocently.

"You must tell me all about it sometime," she pleaded. "Later, though. Right now I'm going to throw away that overgrown toy so I can find some room to get my hypnotic lure into the ship."

She nodded distastefully toward Quade's bloated three-dimensional camera.

"Hypnotic lure," said Quade bitterly, eyeing an over-sized gadget composed chiefly of revolving mirrors and varicolored light tubes.

Tommy Strike wandered along at this moment. He marched quickly to the angry pair.

"Hello," he said with forced geniality. "I was just going down to the Silver Space Suit for a bit. Come along, Gerry? Quade?"

"Can't," the movie man grunted. "Too busy. Things are getting in my hair."

He cast a baleful glance at Gerry, who smiled radiantly and nodded at Strike.

"Be right with you, Tommy. I'll clean up a bit."

She departed in search of lipstick.

Quade asked intently, when the woman had gone, "Do you really like being around poison ivy? For two cents I'd throw up this business and go fishing. The mariloca are running now."

"And you want to follow their example, eh?" Strike asked. "It isn't as bad as all that. You just don't--er--understand Gerry."



"Oh, so that's it," said Quade. "I was wondering. Hell, why does she want to fill the ship with her mousetraps when we need most of the space for camera equipment? We don't know what conditions we'll find on the comet, and we've got to be prepared for every emergency. A cyanogen atmosphere needs special lenses and films."

"Sure," Strike placated. "You're right as far as that goes. But Gerry's right, too. She doesn't know what sort of life we may find on the comet, if any. And we've got to be prepared for anything. Bullets don't work on some creatures, and gas won't work on others. You can lure whiz-bangs with tobacco smoke, but it takes infra-red light to attract a Hyclops."

"I've seen the time when Gerry's forethought in taking along one little gadget, which we never expected to use, saved our lives and netted us big dough. Maybe you'll get the best picture in the world, Quade. But it won't mean anything if you're killed because we didn't bring the right weapon with us."

Quade nodded. "Maybe. I see your point. Well, as long as that cyclone in skirts stops riding me, I can take it. I'll try, anyway."

He strode away hastily as Gerry appeared, trim and dapper in jodhpurs and shimmering metalumen blouse. She looked ravishing.

"How can anyone so lovely have such a bad temper?" he murmured, steering Gerry toward a taxicab. "Some time you're going to die of spontaneous combustion."

"Oh, you've been talking to that animated camera," the woman remarked. "Well, can you blame me? You know how much good equipment means."

They were rolling along Lunar Boulevard when Gerry spoke again. "Well? Don't you agree?"

"More or less." Strike lit a cigarette by drawing deeply on it, so a speck of platinum black, embedded in the tobacco, was kindled into flame. "Less, if you want it. You're only seeing your side, Gerry. After all, Quade's job is to shoot a picture. Or the backgrounds, anyway. Put yourself in his place."

Gerry wrinkled her nose distastefully and said not another word till they were seated in the Dome Room of the Silver Space Suit. Then she finally relented and smiled at Strike.

"You win," she said. "I'll be good. If you'll dance with me."

The orchestra was just plunging into the opening chords of that latest smash hit, *Swinging the Libration*. Gerry and Strike accordingly rose and librated in the current mode. Gerry sighed.

"What's the matter?"

"These jodhpurs," the woman said disconsolately. "Wish I had on a dress--organdy-blue."

By which it appears that *Catch-'em-Alive* Carlyle was somewhat feminine after all....

Events marched ahead. Hollywood on the Moon raced against the comet's thundering drive as it swept in toward the Sun. Nine Planets' corps of scientists worked frantically. All the complicated machinery of the technical side of the movie industry swung into well-oiled cooperative movement. Bulletins were placed hourly on Quade's desk.

But then a new and dangerous factor entered the situation--time.

The comet would swing extremely close to the Sun. Unchecked solar radiation would be fatal to any life on the comet.

An insulated ship can exist for a short time on Mercury, and even narrow-beam radio communication is possible there. But Almussen's Comet would swing well within Mercury's orbit. At that distance, the Sun's tremendous radiations would instantly short-circuit a human brain coming into range. Not even the special armor would help. Moreover, the comet's mass might set up solar tides. If that happened, the strange intergalactic wanderer would be swallowed in colossal cataracts of solid flame.

Quade and Gerry had only a few weeks, therefore, to complete their preparations, make the voyage, and achieve their aims.

Another danger that occurred to most speculative minds was luckily not apt to materialize. The small mass of the average comet could not upset the delicate balance of the Solar System. Almussen's Comet, though, had a solid core, massive enough to raise energy storms on the Sun's surface--and sufficient to deflect a large asteroid or even a small planet from its orbit, Jupiter was safe enough, and even Earth. But Mercury might succumb.

By a lucky chance, however, the comet would not pass sufficiently close to any of the inner planets to cause serious trouble.

Quade insisted that the ship be checked and triple-checked. He admitted frankly that he was apprehensive. If the vessel happened to be wrecked on the comet's surface, the inevitable result would be death when the Sun neared the smaller body.

Both Gerry Carlyle and Tony Quade had been in dangerous spots

from Pluto to Mercury Hotside. But this was the most perilous voyage either had ever undertaken.

They did not underestimate the possibility of disaster. The electronic bombardment of the comet's coma might mean destruction at the very start of the quest. A special double hull had been constructed, which further increased the bulk of the unwieldy ship. But it had not been built for maneuverability, so that didn't matter.

Gerry was considerably irritated by Von Zorn's insistence on filming in detail all the preparations for the voyage. It seemed to her that the cameramen, at Quade's instigation, always took special pains to wait till her hair was mussed and her lipstick smeared.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the obstacles, the day of the takeoff at last arrived.

It was spectacular enough to satisfy even Von Zorn. Gerry, who was decidedly photogenic, was induced to pose for some pictures. Strike, Quade and the crew were included. But the human actors in the drama were dwarfed by the background, more impressive than any constructed set.

In the distance towered the ultra-modern pleasure and business buildings of Hollywood on the Moon--the Silver Space Suit, the studios, the great transparent globe of the sanitarium. Above everything else glowered the jagged ramp of the Great Rim that bounded the crater. Above, misty through the artificial atmosphere, glowed the stars. The Earth, naturally, was invisible. Only on the other side of the Moon could it be seen.

And in the foreground--the ship. Ovoid, squatty enormous, glistening under the arclights, it lay in the center of the field like a vast metallic jewel. And a jewel of science it was, with the best equipment that the

resource of Von Zorn could provide. At the last moment there had been a fanfare of publicity. A tremendous crowd was present to see the takeoff.

Gerry was bored, Quade irritated by the waste of time. But Tommy enjoyed all the fuss.

"Nice place," said Strike pleasantly. "I think I'd make a swell movie star."

"Doubling for a Venus glider?" Gerry inquired with heavy irony. "After all, I'm employing you, Captain Strike. A little cooperation--"

"Okay, buttercup," Tommy said jauntily, to Gerry's scarlet embarrassment, since Quade was within earshot. The latter said nothing, but his grin was most expressive as he continued on his way to the controls.



# Chapter IV.

Trapped--Alive!

A flare of rockets thundered up, music boomed out, and the Silver Space Suit quartet began to chant the Spaceman's Song. Anti-gravity screens quivered as energy pulsed through them from the powerful motors.

In the control room, Gerry was flung into Strike's arms as the ship lurched. Quade's fingers flickered rapidly over a score of buttons. His grin had vanished, his jaw jutted noticeably. There was sudden tension in his attitude.

The vessel swung heavily to the left, then to the right. Abruptly it bucked like a bronco. Then it regained an even keel, and slowly, heavily, it began to mount

"Whew," said Quade without relaxing. "What a crate. You can't maneuver the damn thing at all. If we'd been using old-style rockets, we'd have cracked up muy pronto."

"But we can reach the comet, can't we?" Gerry said worriedly.

"Yeah. We do have speed. But no maneuverability. It'll be plenty risky, piloting this jalopy through the asteroid belt."

Quade's lean face was grim as he studied the visiplat showing his course.

"We head out and intercept the comet in the major planet zone," Strike said. "That'll give us a certain amount of time before the comet gets too close to the Sun."

"I'm jamming on acceleration," Quade nodded. "But we can't meet the comet head on. We'd pass it—we couldn't decelerate swiftly enough. We've got to curve around, slanting through the coma, and that's the most dangerous part. To do that we had to sacrifice either protection or maneuverability, and we've plenty of protection. But not enough, maybe, if we slant through the coma instead of driving straight in. I don't know how much electronic bombardment the hull will stand." He shrugged wryly.

Quade was right. It was a perilous venture. Most ships, with their controlled gravity-screens, were able to turn or stop on a micron. But the bulk of this special vessel defeated its own purpose to some extent. She was a bulking, lumbering, leviathan, and yet potentially vulnerable to the dangerous menace of the comet. Now she streaked out from the Moon with mad disregard for trespassers in her path.

Space traffic had been warned. A lane had been cleared. An intricate chart and map was before Quade, citing the orbit of every known asteroid and meteor in his route. The hull repellers were turned on full power, to give warning of any large body nearby. No other precautions could be taken, unless the crew wore space armor day and night.

It was the asteroid belt which provided the greatest obstacle. The outer hull was riddled by hundreds of punctures. A smaller vessel could have slid through the uncharted meteorite swarm. Quade's craft could not, though he managed to avoid the main body, which would have ruined the ship completely.

The repellers blew out with a terrific crash under the strain of trying to throw off countless small but massive bodies. But the second hull, built of super-steel, withstood the slackened speed of most of the interplanetary missiles. A few got through, but emergency valves were immediately employed.



Two gravity-screens were destroyed

The ship thundered on amidst the stars. Inside the control cabin, there was blank silence. Quade, Gerry, and Strike looked at one another in dismay.

Quade was the first to recover. He flicked over an audiophone switch and yelled commands. Emergency galvanized him into an energetic dynamo.

"Morgan, mobilize the crew. Get a report right away. Let me know the extent of the damage. Prepare space suits for outside repairs."

"Yes, sir."

"Outside repairs?" Gerry said. "We're nearly at the comet."

"So what?" Quade asked. "We're not taking this boat into the coma with a weakened hull. Even after repair it'll be plenty risky."

"But we may enter the coma any time. If your crew is outside then...."

Her pause was significant.

"It'll be a volunteer job," Quade replied grimly. He turned to the audiophone again. "Well?"

"All the men have volunteered, Tony," Morgan reported briefly. He went on to list the damage.

"Issue space suits. Put enough men inside to take care of that job. Get volunteers to go outside. Be with you right away. Send up an emergency pilot to handle the ship."

"Oh. You're going out too," Gerry said.

"Yeah."

"So am I," Tommy Strike remarked happily. "Every little bit helps."

He turned to the door.

"Tommy!" Gerry cried. "No. You can't." She hesitated, breathing hard. "If you do, I'm going too."

Quade intervened. "We need every man we can get. But volunteers only. Strike doesn't have to go."

"Listen, Gerry, I'm going out and you're going to stay here," Tommy said. "You can help by piloting the boat, so the emergency pilot can go outside with us. As Tony says, we need every hand."

Gerry, about to remonstrate, caught Quade's eye. There was a satirical look in it, as though the movie man expected Gerry to display some "feminine" reaction, perhaps even throw a fit. The woman's lips tightened.

"Right," she said succinctly. "Scram, boys."

Quade and Strike went out. Gerry turned to the controls. Her gaze went to the visiplat, to the glowing menace of the comet dangerously near. A red spark on the screen showed the progress of the ship. Gerry blinked rapidly.

Meanwhile, Quade was mobilizing his men. Some were already working on the wall of the ship, welding on emergency patches hastily brought from the storerooms. Others were struggling into space suits and lining up before the air-locks. Some were entering the inner hull of the craft, protected by their armor, bearing with them

the necessary tools.

Most of the welding machines were mounted on universal ball-bearing tripods of light metal that could be rolled easily across the hull. In each device was a small gravity-control unit, so the machine could be fixed firmly in place for the actual repair work. Quade superintended the exodus.

Outside the air-lock, clad in his armor and transparent helmet of flexible glass, he started the first unit of men at the ship's prow. It would have been impossible to locate each microscopic puncture in the huge area of the hull. But as the crew emerged, each picked up a portable tank, equipped with a flexible hose which ended in a round disc, easily seven feet in diameter.

A man would place this disc flat against the hull, turn a nozzle in the tank, and walk quickly forward, dragging the hose after him. The mass of the ship, coupled with the suits' gravityunits, made this means of progression possible. In the trail of each disc, a smear of sticky substance gleamed whitely, congealing immediately in the vacuum of space. Soon a good portion of the hull was completely plated with the stuff.

Tony Quade barked an order into his suit's audiophone. Inside the vessel, a man turned a screw, letting into the forward compartments of the hull a special gas that expanded swiftly. Where punctures occurred in the outer hull, the elastic coating exploded into huge bubbles, black in contrast to the surrounding whiteness. These marked the goal of dozens of men, hurrying toward the punctures with their welding units.

It was a remarkable example of well-trained coordination. Strike, busy dragging a hose and disc toward the stern, was impressed. He looked at Quade with renewed respect. More than once, he glanced

ahead at the tremendous sweep of the comet, blotting out half the heavens.

Black void, star-speckled, lay all around. The men worked in airless emptiness, with the Sun a far disc astern. The pallid glare of Almussen's Comet threw their weirdly elongated shadows grotesquely along the hull. In the absence of air the sharp contrast between light and darkness was striking. The helmet lights, naturally, threw no beams, since there were no air-motes to reflect the illumination.

Inside the ship Gerry Carlyle sat at the controls, her face drained of all color, and grimly drove the vessel at top speed toward the comet. Inexorably the red dot on the visiplat screen crept toward the white boundary of the coma. When it entered it, any man still outside the ship would die instantly under the terrific electronic bombardment.

And Tommy Strike was out there. That was the only thought she could get through her mind.

Every man in the crew realized the peril. Tony Quade had grimly explained the dangers. But not one thought of giving up his job, though the comet was the target of apprehensive glances. Welding machines clamped pneumatically against the hull. Pale fires sputtered and blazed. Slowly, in an eternity, the crippled giant was mended.

But its race through the void continued unchecked. In the control room, Gerry Carlyle gnawed her lips and watched the red dot leap swiftly toward the white circle of the comet's head.

Two inches lay between. At this speed, the gap would be bridged all too soon. Gerry's hand hovered momentarily over a button, and then drew back. No. Deceleration must not begin yet. But there was so

little time!

The audiophone skirled. Quade's voice rasped out, clipped and staccato.

"What's the distance? How much time have we?" Gerry made a quick computation and told him. The movie man whistled.

"Yeah. Well, follow the course. See you soon."

"Quade--" Gerry said.

"What?"

"Nothing," the woman whispered, and turned back to the controls. There were dark shadows under her eyes. Danger for herself she could face without flinching. But this was something entirely different. If Strike died under the electronic bombardment, it would be her hand that had killed him. Strained reasoning, perhaps--but Gerry loved her man.

She looked at the visiplat. Suddenly she became conscious that she had been holding her breath for some time. The woman exhaled deeply and tried to relax. It was useless.

The red speck crawled toward the comet. It was less than an inch away.

Half an inch.

All the future crawled by her. Gerry was immobile at the controls. There was hell in her eyes. No sound came to her from the outside hull. She could guess nothing of what was happening there. And that was, perhaps, the worst. She didn't know whether Strike was still alive or not. Should she call Quade on the audiophone?

A quarter of an inch, and the gap still narrowed.

The red speck touched the white circle.

Gerry's iron control snapped. She flicked a switch, called: "Quade! We're in the coma--"

"Hold it, kid," said a low voice behind her. The woman whirled, pivoting on her seat. Tommy Strike, disheveled but grinning, was standing on the threshold, unzipping his space suit. Behind him came Quade, his face glistening with perspiration.

Gerry's reaction was instantaneous.

"It's about time," she snapped. "I've been--"

And then the tornado struck!

Only a super-ship could have withstood it even for a moment. The electronic bombardment would have destroyed an ordinary liner instantly. Gerry spun back toward the control panel. Her slim fingers played the keyboard like a pianist's. The vessel rocked, shuddered, swayed, screaming in tortured agony.

No meteorite-storm, this. The very fabric of matter was the target for a blast of pure, unadulterated energy that raved and tore at the hull. Refrigerators rose into a shrill, high-pitched whine of incredible power.

Nevertheless the outer hull glowed red. The weak patches flared into white incandescence.

The skeleton of the ship strained and stretched as though on the rack. Girders and struts of toughest metal screeched. Gerry felt a

warning tingle in her fingertips.

Quade sprang to the audiophone.

"Special suits on," he shouted. "Double-quick, every man!"

He dragged three black suits from a locker, threw one to Strike, donned one himself, and pushed Gerry from the controls with little tenderness.

"Get into it," he snapped, his mittened hands manipulating buttons. "Hurry."

Gerry obeyed. She knew that not even the ship's armor could entirely withstand the terrific bombardment of radioactivity. Too much of it would short-circuit a brain, unless protected by a helmet such as Gerry was hastily putting on.

Usually a space ship is silent. But now it was bedlam. The motors keened in rhythmic, throbbing pulsations. The visiplatte glowed and paled. It showed nothing but a racing flood of white light. The instruments and gauges were haywire.

"Blind flying," Quade grunted. "If we crack up--"

He turned the ship into a narrowing spiral and began to decelerate. A bell rang warningly.

"One of the patches has gone out," Strike said. "Listen. I can go inside the hull with a welder and repair it."

"Wouldn't work," Quade snapped. "You wouldn't last three seconds."

"My armor--"

The movie man merely shook his head silently and bent over the controls. The ship drove on doggedly, battling an environment that no space craft had ever encountered in history. Searing, blasting fires of pure energy battered at the hull. Instruments were useless. Exposed metal began to glow with dim, faint fluorescence.

Quade was worrying about his precious film. Raw celluloid would have been rendered useless minutes ago. He had known that in advance. The special thin-wire film he had taken in lieu of it might resist the bombardment. But then it might not. There was no way to tell.

Suddenly, without warning, it was over. The crackling thunder of the storm died. The visiplat gave a last flare and became normal. It showed--

The nucleus of the comet! Something that had never been seen before by any human being.

Quade had a brief impression of a pale mass expanding with terrifying speed, a globe that rushed toward him like a thunderbolt. Small at first, it grew nearly to the Moon's size before he could decelerate. It was dangerous business. Swift deceleration would cause something worse than the bends--caisson disease--and a crack-up would mean insanity, death.

Quade swung the ship aside, circling the comet's body in a wide orbit. He could as yet make out no features of the sphere beneath him. The ship was moving too fast. He touched buttons.

The quick deceleration punched him in the stomach and slammed him against the padded control panel. Gerry and Strike went flying across the room, to bounce off the cushioned walls. That was the worst of it.



Quade pushed more buttons. The ship slowed down and spiraled inward. It wobbled badly. More of the gravity-screens had blown out.

"We've got to land for repairs," he said briefly. "Strike, check up on the damage."

Tommy nodded and went out. Gerry came to peer over Quade's shoulder at the visiplat.

"It looks--dead," she said. "No mountains or bodies of water. Just a featureless sphere, smaller than the Moon."

"Featureless?" Quade retorted. "Look over there."

Rising from the pale surface beneath them was a black structure, tiny in the distance, resembling a huge monolith or tower. It flashed past and was gone.

The vessel slanted down swiftly. It paused, hung in mid-air, dropped to a clumsy, lopsided landing.

"Whew!" Quade leaned back in his seat, relaxing for a few moments. "What a job."

He removed his helmet and wriggled out of the special suit.

"Well, we're here," he announced, sighing with relief.

Gerry watched Tony crunch a caffeine citrate tablet between his teeth and swallow it wryly.

"There's life here, Quade. That tower--"

"Looks like it. But we've got to take precautions."

"Exactly. The air here can't be breathable. I'll find out."

She examined the automatic atmosphere analyzer.

"Cyanogen," she said. "We can't breathe it, of course. We'll need space suits outside the ship at all times."

Quade pondered. "What sort of life-form can live in cyanogen?"

"Why not cyanogen instead of oxygen? I can't guess what the life-forms might look like. But there must be life. That tower proves it."

"First of all, though, we need rest and repairs," Quade said. "We don't want to be marooned here when the comet reaches the Sun." He barked orders into the audiophone, and rose to superintend matters. "None of the crew was hurt. That's lucky."

Events marched. For the nonce, Gerry was left out of things, and she didn't like it. Even Tommy Strike seemed to ignore her. He was always busy inside the hull, welding on a patch. The huntress wandered about for a time, frustration mounting within her.

At last she decided to take matters into her own small but capable hands. After all, she wasn't merely the supercargo.

She donned a space suit, pocketed a gas-gun and an explosive-projectile pistol, and let herself into a space-lock. The outer valve slid open. Gerry stepped out, closing the portal after her.

Loose, gritty gravel crunched under her booted feet. She looked toward a sharply curved horizon of low, rolling dunes, all apparently composed of the same substance. No vegetation was visible.

Well, that was logical enough, she thought. A comet, being made of a lot of loose particles bound together by mutual attraction, would

have a fairly solid core. But the surface should be pretty much like deep, loose gravel. The stones themselves resembled granite--hard, gray, rounded by eons of friction.

Gerry looked up. A little thrill of awe shook her.

No sky stretched above. A flood of white flame was her heaven. She was inside the comet--within the coma! The vault above her was neither blue nor the starry black of space. It was pure white, seething and crawling in strange, vast tides, rippling in amazing perpetual motion.

These were all--the pale glory of the sky, the gravel dunes all around, and, behind Gerry, the towering bulk of the ship. But the woman had marked her direction well. She stepped out confidently in the direction where the black tower had reared.

She was, perhaps, too confident. But after all she was Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle. She had made certain that, if necessary, she could communicate with the ship by her suit's audiophone.

Gerry Carlyle, the first human being to stand on a comet's surface. A little smile touched her red lips. That really meant something.

She hiked on doggedly. It was hard going, and the loose gravel made the muscles of her calves ache. She consulted a magnetic compass, which wasn't working. She shrugged and continued trudging. Gerry, of course, had an excellent sense of direction.

But the rolling dunes were utterly featureless, bathed in the shadow's white glow. The nucleus was a land of perpetual daylight....

On she went, and on. How far was the tower? A warning premonition touched Gerry. Perhaps she had been too rash. After all, this was a new world, with unknown and probably dangerous life-forms. But a

glance at her weapons reassured her. She went on.

Something like a blue basketball rolled down the slope of a dune toward her.

Gerry stopped immediately. Her gloved hands went with deceptive casualness to the butts of her guns. She stood alert, waiting.

A blue basketball, a foot or so in diameter, stopped ten feet from Gerry. She was able to scrutinize it closely.

The bluish tinge was light, she saw, and the outer skin was translucent, almost transparent. Inside the globe a smaller black object floated, seemingly in liquid. There were no signs of any organs. Eyes, ears, respiratory apparatus, the thing had none of these.

It started to grow, with the speed of a nightmare mushroom.

It expanded to four feet in diameter before Gerry reacted. She read menace in the creature's actions, or thought she did. Her hand snapped the gas-gun from her belt.

Immediately the sphere vanished, disappeared like the figment of a dream. Where it had been was nothing.

Gerry stood frozen, wondering if the creature had exploded, or departed with incredible speed. But, instinctively, she knew that neither of these guesses was the correct one.

Some instinct made her turn. The blue sphere was rolling slowly toward her from the opposite direction, now nearly six feet in diameter.

Gerry pointed the gun, expecting her enemy to vanish. It did, promptly

and thoroughly. The woman whirled. Two blue globes, now ten feet in diameter, were bearing down on her.

The interior body within the outer membrane had not expanded, and was still about six inches in diameter.

Gerry fired. The pellet hit the nearer of the things. Anesthetic gas spurted in a compact cloud. It did not a bit of damage. The globe expanded still further and advanced purposefully.

Gerry tried the explosive pistol. It was equally useless, for an entirely different reason. True, it blew the sphere to fragments, but when Gerry turned, six new ones, large and bluish, were stealthily approaching.

"It isn't real," Gerry said desperately to herself. "I'm going insane."

She suddenly thought of the audiophone. As she was about to use it, the nearest of the monsters arrested her attention.

On its aquamarine surface a picture was forming. It took shape, color, and size.

A three-dimensional reproduction of Gerry Carlyle appeared there.

"Good Lord," the woman whispered. "Are they intelligent, after all?"

Cautiously, she eyed her double. The reproduction of herself bent into a hoop-shape and began to roll rapidly forward.

On the screen of the globe's bluish outer membrane, the scene was amazingly vivid and realistic.

Then the pseudo-Gerry rose and began to walk, stiffly and jerkily. Gerry herself caught the idea. The monsters moved about by rolling.

They must be wondering why this strange visitant did not progress in the same manner.

An idea occurred to Gerry. If she could make friends with the creatures, even lure one to the ship, it would be a considerable achievement.

She lifted one arm in the immemorial gesture of peace.

It was misunderstood. The nearest of the globes expanded to twenty feet, jumped forward, knocked Gerry flat. She clawed out her gun and blew it to bits, while trying to rise.

Another sphere materialized in the empty air above her. It smashed on her helmet, knocking the weapon from her hand. Its outer membrane folded elastically around the woman's space suit. She was lifted, struggling frantically.

The sphere began to roll up a gravel dune. Gerry caught flashing alternate glimpses of light and darkness.

She managed to turn on the audiophone and yell for help.

There was only a faint buzzing sound. The device was broken. The banging it had received had disrupted its delicate mechanism.

Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle had been caught--alive!



# Chapter V.

## Mad World

Gerry wasn't missed from the ship immediately. There was too much to be done. Not even Tommy Strike noticed that she was gone until considerable time had elapsed. By that time, of course, it was too late.

"I've learned the value of a getaway," Quade told Tommy, in the midst of a hubbub of repair. "If we run into real trouble, we want to be able to scram. There's no use filming and capturing life-forms if we get stuck on the comet when it gets close to the Sun."

Strike nodded. "Right you are. But things ought to be well under control by now, eh?"

"They are. Where's your side-kick?" Quade demanded.

"I'll find out." Tommy went away. When he returned he looked puzzled, worried. "She's gone. And a suit's gone, too."

Quade swore helplessly. He turned to an audiophone and sent out a qrz call.

"Calling Gerry Carlyle. qrz-qrz-Calling Gerry Carlyle."

There was no response.

"Well," Quade said at last, "we'll make sure she's not in the ship. But I feel pretty sure she isn't."

"She doesn't answer the call," Strike observed. "That means she can't."



There was orderly confusion. Presently a half-dozen men issued from the ship, clad in grotesque lightweight armor, flexible but airtight. Quade and Tommy Strike led the group.

"We can't take the ship," the movie man pondered. "The repairs aren't finished, and it's too bulky to maneuver easily. I want no chances of a crack-up till the final take-off. We'll have to depend on our legs. The portocars are no good on this gravel."

"Which way?" Strike asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Can't see much from here." Quade took a periscope from his kit, stretched it out, and peered through the eyepiece. "No soap. There's a high dune. Let's go up there."

They did. But nothing was visible.

"Let me--" Strike began. He paused. His jaw dropped. He glared down into the valley they had just left. "Gerry."

The others followed the direction of his shaky, pointing finger. Gerry Carlyle was down there, her red hair disheveled within the transparent helmet. Clad in bulky space armor, she came running in panic up the slope.

But she wasn't getting anywhere!

Her legs pumped up and down. Her body was bent forward at a sharp angle. Racing as hard as she could, it was all she could do to stay in one place.

Then she vanished.

Strike and Quade looked at each other, gasped, stared back to the

valley. Bleak, desolate, and empty, it lay washed in the white glare of the surging skies.

"It was Gerry, wasn't it?" Tommy gulped.

"Like Alice," Quade replied, completely flabbergasted. "She had to run faster and faster to keep in one spot.... What sort of place is this, anyway?"

"Think it could have been a mirage?" Strike asked hopefully.

Quade led the way down the slope. He pointed to unmistakable footprints, dents in the gravelly ground.

"Mirages don't do that. It was solid. Gerry Carlyle was there, and she vanished."

Without warning, the tower materialized. Fifty feet away it sprang into sudden existence. A high, huge monolith of black, stone or metal, it was featureless, save for a gaping door and a gleaming bright sphere at the summit. As unexpectedly as it had come, it disappeared.

"Phantoms," Quade said helplessly. "But three-dimensional, solid, real. Radio transmission of matter?"

"That tower!" Strike said. "We saw something like it from the air."

"It was back in that direction, Chief," one of the men broke in. "Not too far to walk."

"Okay," Quade replied. "Hop to it. Remember, we're in a cyanogen atmosphere. Helmets on at all times. Keep your guns ready." He called the ship and told Morgan his plans. "Take charge till we get back. If we don't make it before the deadline, take off without us."

None of the other men made any objection to this. Grimly they shouldered their packs and followed Quade and Strike down the valley.

It promised to be a dull journey. But that was only at first. Strike was the one who first caught sight of the blue sphere.

It rested on top of a dune, motionless, resembling some strange form of plant life. Warily they approached it. It was a ten-foot globe of translucent membrane, with a black nucleus inside that floated in some liquid.

"Think it's alive?" Strike asked.

"If it is, it breathes cyanogen. If it breathes."

Quade reached out to touch the thing--and it vanished.

It stayed vanished. Five minutes later the men gave up and continued their journey. Soon after this they encountered another sphere, similar to the first, but reddish instead of blue.

Quade approached within a few feet. Cautiously, trying not to make any sudden motion, he turned on his audiophone broadcaster. He made conciliatory noises. The globe shivered, and a picture formed on its surface.

It was a duplicate of Quade.

"It's a mirror," Strike said softly.

"No. Look at that."

The image of Quade was moving. It extended its arms and bowed,

though the original made no motion. It jumped up and down, and then vanished as the membrane went blank. The picture had been perfectly distinct, three-dimensional.

Another picture formed. This time it showed the space ship.

It also vanished. The sphere increased in size like an inflated balloon, and the men sprang back in alarm. But no hostile move was made. Instead, the thing disappeared.

In its place stood a model of the space ship. It was no more than six feet high, but complete in each detail.

This vanished, also. The original sphere, or a duplicate of it, reappeared. It shrank to a few inches and was gone.

"I will be damned," Quade said, slowly and emphatically. "It can't be happening. The thing's a super motion-picture projector."

"Intelligent?" Strike asked.

"Dunno. That membrane--I've a hunch it's composed of evolved, highly adaptable cells, which take the place of our own normal senses. Respiration, vision, and so forth may be accomplished by those cells. Communication--they seem to do it visually, by projecting pictures of thought-images on their membranous surface."

"But how can they vanish like that? And assume different shapes? That thing took the form of our space ship. Maybe of Gerry, too."

Quade made a despairing gesture. "Too deep for me, Strike. I think the key's in that black tower we saw. Let's get going."

An eternity of plodding, laborious marching ensued. Overhead white fires of the comet blazed, twisting in strange, titanic tides. The terrain

underfoot was monotonous beyond description. Inside the suits, the men perspired and swore under their breath.

A creature like prehistoric Tyrannosaurus Rex leaped from nowhere. It stood kangaroo-like on its hind legs atop a dune, and stared around, its reptilian, flat head revolving slowly. It was at least twenty-five feet high. But that wasn't the most amazing part of the apparition.

Strike seized Quade's arm.

"That's a Venusian whip," he yelped. "A Venusian monster! Here--on the comet."

"You're crazy," Quade said.

Then he saw it. His eyes bulged. "It--it can't be real," Strike said desperately. "It can't be."

The whip settled the problem by sighting the men. Flicking out its long, prehensile tongue, it charged down the slope. The thunder of its progress shook the ground. It was certainly no phantom. Strike jerked his rifle to his shoulder and fired. The giant reptile flung back its head, hissed with ear-shattering shrillness. But still it continued its onrush.

The men were well-trained enough not to give way to panic. They scattered, each unlimbering his weapon. They evaded the monster's charge, but the prehensile tongue flicked out like greased lightning and rasped over Quade's suit as he sprang away. The guns bellowed out with staccato roars.

The whip, its head blown completely off, ran around in a vast circle. It took a long while before the minor brain in the tail-end of its spine brought it the realization that it was dead. Then, abruptly, it toppled over. The great tail continued swishing, the muscles twitched under

the scaly hide.

"Phantom?" Quade said bitterly. "I don't think so. It isn't vanishing, is it?"

"I don't get it," Strike mused. "A Venusian life-form on the comet. Somebody else might have forestalled us. But why bring a whip here?"

There seemed to be no solution to the problem. Nor was it possible to examine the giant carcass closely. Muscular reaction still made it a bundle of potential dynamite, twitching and jerking as it did at unexpected intervals. So the men resumed their march.

They were unquestionably nervous, and Quade could not blame them. He himself jumped slightly when Strike cried out: "Say, I just thought of something. How can an oxygen-breathing whip live in a cyanogen atmosphere?"

There was no possible answer to that, of course.

The next arrival was the red sphere, or a duplicate of it. It appeared on the summit of a dune, rolled down toward the Earthmen, and suddenly hesitated. From empty air around it appeared a dozen bluish globes, converging on the original one. They formed a milling, chaotic group of bubbles. When they drew away, the red one was gone. A deflated, punctured skin lay on the gravel, and colorless ichor was running out of it.

A score of reddish globes materialized from the air. The blue ones began to roll rapidly away, the newcomers in furious pursuit. Both groups scooted over a rise and disappeared, this time in a somewhat more logical manner.

"Didn't see us, I guess," Strike said.

"No.... The blue ones seemed down on the red ones, and vice versa. Two different tribes or species, perhaps. But the color seems to be the only difference."

"I wonder if they're intelligent," Strike persisted.

"It's difficult to say," Quade replied thoughtfully as he trudged on, plowing through the gravel. "It doesn't seem so, but their thought-processes may be so entirely alien to ours that there's probably no common ground to meet on. There are vast gaps even between the System's planetary life-forms.

"Originally the Arbermius spores, drifting through the void, may have created life. But adaptation and environment played a tremendous part. Besides, I doubt if any sort of spore could get through this comet's coma. Microscopic bodies, shoved around by radiation, would be repelled by the electronic barrier. I told you we might run into almost anything here. We're outside normal boundaries--almost outside our known Universe."

"Are you telling me?" Strike replied bitterly. "Look! I might swallow a whip, but--this is too much."

Quade didn't believe what he saw. The other men were stupefied with amazement. They had topped a dune. In the valley beneath them squatted a vast bulk. It was alive, but it wasn't homogeneous. It was a freak, a sport, and an impossible one.

It had the body of an elephant, gaudily striped with a zebra's markings. It had the neck of an ostrich, unduly elongated. Its thin, awkward legs resembled those of a giraffe. And atop that lean, gawky neck was--the head of Tommy Strike.

It was quite unmistakable, to the last freckle and lock of disordered hair falling over the tanned forehead. It looked into space with a wildly vacuous air, turned toward the Earthmen. The colossal hulk writhed, struggled. For a second it stood erect. Then the frail legs splintered, and the torso came crashing down. It struggled in agony.

Incontinently, it vanished.

"All right," Quade said to the befuddled Strike. "That settles it. The whip was a known life-form. This wasn't."

"The component parts were."

Quade refrained from the obvious rebuttal. "Yes. But nothing like that, in toto, ever existed in any universe. It was created, somehow, and it disappeared into thin air. The question is how?"

"Dunno. I think the question's why?"

Quade resumed his forward march.

"The answer to both is in the black tower, I'm certain. It shouldn't be far away now."

They saw it long before they reached it, a colossal structure rearing from the gravelly surface of the comet. It seemed entirely deserted. It was a duplicate of the phantom monolith that had appeared some time before. The same gateway yawned uninvitingly. The same shimmering, metallic sphere crowned the summit, crawling with unknown but potent force.

"Those red and blue globes never built that," Strike said emphatically. "It was built by hands, or their equivalent."

"Maybe the ancestors of our little friends did it," Quade said. "That



tower may have stood there for a long, long time. Besides, it might have been built by machinery."

"Machines? Why should the globes use 'em? That outer membrane of theirs serves every purpose. They probably absorb food through it, if they don't acquire it in this screwy atmosphere by respiration."

"That could be, of course. Meanwhile, let's go down and investigate."

Furtively, they sneaked to the threshold of the tower and peered in. A huge bare chamber gaped before them. It was lit by dim, pale fluorescence, and seemed to stretch up and eternally. The interior of the tower was hollow. But far above Quade caught the gleam of metal.

"Machine up there--"

He was interrupted by a cry from Strike.

"Gerry!"

The woman lay across the vast room, stretched unconscious on the floor.

Strike raced toward her, the others not far behind. He knelt beside the woman, examining her oxygen apparatus. Quickly he turned a valve.

Gerry's face was flushed. Her lips were moving, and her eyes stared blankly, unseeingly. For a second, Strike imagined that the creatures of the comet had afflicted her with some weird disease. Then he recognized that this was merely delirium.

"Back to the ship," Quade commanded. "Two of you carry her."

"It's too late," Tommy Strike grunted. "Here come our little friends."

Dozens of the blue spheres were rolling across the threshold into the huge room. More and more of them flooded in. Inexorably they bore down on the trapped Earthmen.

Strike gently lowered Gerry to the floor and whipped out his gun. The others had already drawn. But none fired till the hostile intentions of the intruders became unmistakable.

Then Quade's explosive bullet blew one of the blue globes to fragments. A staccato blast of gunfire instantly boomed and echoed through the cyanogen atmosphere within the tower, when his men followed his lead. A dozen of the enemy vanished, collapsing like split bladders. Curiously enough, some of them continued their disappearance, dematerializing like ghosts. Others remained.

But more of them appeared. Quade and his companions were forced back against the inner wall. They had plenty of ammunition, but it was impossible to withstand the irresistible tide of the globes.

"Where in hell are they coming from?" Strike yelled.

On they came, more and more of them, till the floor of the tower was covered with bluish balls, ranging in size from two to ten feet.

Quade switched on his audiophone and called Morgan, at the ship.

"What's up, Chief?" Morgan asked, hearing the commotion.

"Come after us, quick," the cameraman said quietly. In a few succinct sentences, he explained the situation, pausing at times to take pot-shots at the monsters.

"Can't do it," Morgan said. "One of the engines just went out. It'll take

hours to fix. We'll come and get you on foot."

"No," Quade snapped. "Stay in the ship. Get that engine fixed. Those are definite orders."

He had no time to say any more. Some of his men were already down, and the globes were rolling over them. Strike stood straddle-legged above Gerry's unmoving form, a gun in either hand. The remnant of the men were clustered together. Backed helplessly against the wall, they were surrounded by the advancing hordes. Abruptly, unexpectedly, there came a breathing space.

The reason for it could not be discovered at first. Quade only realized that the attackers were failing to press their advantage. Previously, when one sphere had been destroyed, another sprang immediately into its place. But now the ranks were thinning, almost imperceptibly at first, but with steadily increasing speed. An alleyway opened toward the door, and Quade caught a glimpse of something entirely unexpected.

Through the door poured an army of red globes.

Red spheres and blue met in furious battle. The chamber was a seething, raging mass of bubbles, curiously lovely, tumbling and darting viciously in all directions. In dead silence, without visible weapons, the opposing groups pitted their strength against each other. And blue and red globes were deflated one by one.

"You were right," Strike gasped, swaying on his feet. "Those two gangs are down on one another. Boy, is that lucky for us."

"Yeah. If they're not both down on us."

There was enough time to take inventory. None of the men had been injured, save for minor contusions. The strong, flexible helmets had

withstood all blows.

"No weapons," Strike said. "They don't use any, apparently. But they're committing mayhem anyhow."

Quade lifted his gun and then lowered it without firing.

"No visible weapons, Strike," he amended. "Don't forget, these creatures are utterly alien to us. Their weapons may be purely mental. They might kill by sheer thought-force."

"Then why doesn't it work on us?"

"Were not of the same species. We're of entirely different chemical composition," Quade pointed out. "Say, this fight looks like it'll keep up forever. There're more spheres now than when they started. They keep coming out of empty air."

"I noticed that," Strike grunted. "Hadn't we better make a run for it?"

"I think so."

The movie man issued orders. In a compact body, bearing Gerry's body between them, the group moved forward, guns lifted. The spheres paid little attention until the Earthmen were almost at the door. Then the bizarre comet creatures realized that their prisoners were escaping. Blue monsters and red joined forces to attack Quade and his companions.

This time results were somewhat different. Under the onslaught, most of the men went down, fighting gamely but uselessly. Quade was knocked flat beside Gerry. He twisted his head, trying to rise, saw the woman's eyes open and the light of consciousness spring into them. She recognized Quade.

Her lips moved, but her dead audiophone failed to respond. Nevertheless the movie man managed to read some of the words.

"Out of here . . . quick.... Save the others later. Only chance...."

There was still a gun in Gerry's hand. It blasted. The woman began to roll over and over. After a brief hesitation, Quade followed.

It wasn't easy. The thought of deserting his men was far from pleasant. But he realized that Gerry was seemingly deserting Strike, and he knew that she would never have done that without good reason. Moreover, two might escape where seven couldn't. Most of the globes were occupied with Strike and the other men.

By luck, skill and murderous aim, Gerry and Quade managed to reach the outskirts of the struggle. There they rose. Gerry gripped Quade's mittened hand and both ran frantically up the slope toward the nearest ridge.

Some of the spheres pursued. The next ten minutes were a chaos of gunfire and collapsing red and blue globes.



# Chapter VI.

## Seven Sleepers

When no more of the things appeared, Gerry sank down in the gravel, dragging Quade beside her.

"My audiophone," her lips formed. "Can you fix it?"

Quade had an emergency repair kit with him. Hastily he repaired the device. It wasn't long before Gerry's voice came to him.

"Keep your eyes open," she said breathlessly. "I don't know how much time we have, but it won't be long. We've only got the Proteans to contend with for awhile, but pretty soon all hell's going to break loose."

"Proteans?"

"That's what I call them. You'll know why when I tell you what's happened. Meanwhile, have your gun ready."

Succinctly Gerry outlined what had happened to her up to the time of her capture. She went on: "Those creatures are intelligent. They communicate by pictures--thought-images--projected on their outer membrane. They communicated with me, all right. I found out plenty. Quade, what I'm going to tell you is going to seem unbelievable. Do you know how many Proteans there are?"

"A few thousand?" Tony hazarded.

"Seven," Gerry said. "Seven Proteans, and that's all. Seven sleepers!"

Quade wrinkled his brow. "I don't--"

"They're a decadent race. Ages ago they had an entirely different form, I don't know just what. They've lived on this comet for unimaginable eons. They evolved along lines totally alien to ours, reached the summit of their culture, and began to slide back. This barren body won't support much life. In time, only seven Proteans were left. They were highly evolved intellectuals, chained to this barren world because they hadn't mastered space travel. Know what they did?"

A red sphere materialized twelve feet away. It rolled toward them, expanding as it moved. Quade blew it to fragments. The fragments dissolved into nothingness.

"They built the black tower," Gerry went on. "It's a machine, Quade, and what it does is something almost impossible. It materializes--dreams!"

The man didn't laugh. "On first thought, it's crazy," he said thoughtfully.

"I know. But it's a fact that all living tissue has a sort of electric halo, a field of energy. Isn't that so?"

"Yeah. Why back in the nineteen-thirties, two chaps named Nims and Lane made a gadget sensitive enough to detect that field and record its patterns. But what has that got to do with a dream?"

"Dreams take electric energy, the same as conscious thought," Gerry explained. "I figured it out, as well as I could, from what the Protean told me. Ever have a nightmare where you run and run but get nowhere? Ever wake up covered with perspiration, exhausted? That proves dreams take energy. Listen, if corporal life has a



measurable electric field, it's only a step further to record the energy patterns of a dream."

For a few moments there was silence, while Quade digested the information.

"I'm getting the picture," Quade said. "I think I follow you. If the energy pattern is recorded, why not change these patterns back into the electric waves that produced them, thus recreating the living issue, or the dream, that created them? The human voice was recorded in visible patterns long before Edison. But Edison's phonograph retraced those visible patterns with a needle and made the sound come to life again.

"Sure," he continued. "Even now images can be recorded as sound tracks. They sound like squeals and grunts, but an experienced movie engineer can identify them. I've done it myself. It's not such a long step to playing them back as three-dimensional images."

"More than images," Gerry put in. "The tower does just that, without the intermediate step. Nothing is actually recorded. The towers just take the electric dream-pattern of the seven Proteans and recreate it, broadcast it, in the precise positions and motions that the dreamer wishes."

"You mean all those spheres were dreams?" Quade asked. "Dreams that had acquired the attributes of matter?"

"Yes. They were real. Or, maybe, one-tenth real. Real enough to fight and die and communicate with me."

"But why?" Quade asked. "Scientifically, it's possible, though screwy as hell. But logically, there's no reason for it."

"It's logical enough," the woman declared, shifting her position

uneasily on the hard gravel. "I told you there were seven bored intellectuals left on this comet. Blue and red--four of one, three of another. They couldn't leave their world. They were faced with an unending monotony of existence. What would you have done?"

"Go crazy," Quade admitted frankly.

"There was another way out. They had to create some interest in life. And they did. A deadly sort of chess game, three on one side, four on the other. It's logical enough. Chess is an intellectual pastime, and this is super-scientific chess. Here's what the Proteans did.

"They made this tower to materialize their dreams. They changed their shape, though I'm not quite sure about that. And they materialized their thought-patterns in the form of duplicates of themselves. Half of their brains are asleep and dreaming, while the other half is conscious, directing operations. We ourselves use only half of our brains, you know."

Quade nodded curtly. "Right. But you actually mean there are only seven real Proteans on the comet?"

"That's all. All the others are dream-images, plenty real enough though, because they're given the energy and attributes of matter by the black tower. For centuries this murderous chess game has gone on. It might have gone on eternally, if we hadn't introduced a new factor into the game."

"Wait a minute," Quade interrupted. Swiftly he told the woman of the bizarre creatures they had seen on the way to the tower--the Venusian whip, and the freak with Strike's head.

"Sure." Gerry smiled wryly. "I was delirious, feverish. And I was inside the tower. My proximity to the machine simply made my

hallucinations materialize. And that's the crux of the matter. The Proteans realized that I was valuable to them."

When Gerry stated her value to the Dreamers, Quade fell silent. His tanned face was suddenly grim and worried as he realized the potential danger.

"Think of our memories," Gerry whispered in horror. "The monsters we've seen on all the planets, the weapons we've used. The Proteans intended to put me asleep, control my brain, and induce me to dream of things I'd experienced. A Venusian whip. What a weapon that would be in the hands of the blues against the reds. We're invaluable to them as fodder. Our brains are storehouses of dreams. And the Proteans can materialize dreams!"

"Lord, oh Lord," Quade groaned. "What a mess. This is just about the damndest thing I've ever run up against. How the devil can I photograph a dream? It just isn't real."

"It's real enough to be filmed," Gerry said. "And a Protean, a real Protean, not a dream--can be captured. But there's another handicap. These things are above the minimum level of intelligence. By Interplanetary Law, no intelligent being can be taken from its home world against its consent."

"Well, that can wait," Quade said. "The main problem is to save Strike and my men. Wonder if the ship's ready yet?"

He used the audiophone. Morgan responded worriedly. The engine wasn't repaired but work to repair the ship was proceeding rapidly.

"We can't stay here," Tony said. "And we can't go back to the tower. Let's head for the ship."

"We'd better hurry," Gerry observed. "Once Tommy and the others

are put to sleep, their dreams will start to come true. And Tommy has a vivid imagination."

Quade arose painfully, assisted Gerry to her feet. The woman was still weak, but she pluckily shook off the man's arm and started plodding forward.

"Keep your gun handy," she advised.

The Proteans seemed to be lying low. But once the two caught sight of a whip lumbering over a rise to the left. It did not menace them, however, and soon went out of sight.

"The main problem," Gerry mused, "is to awaken the seven sleeping Proteans. It'll do no good to kill the others. New ones will materialize faster than we can shoot."

"Where are the real ones?" Quade asked.

Gerry laughed bitterly. "Oh, they're not tucked away in a private dormitory. That's where the fun comes in. They're mixed in with the others. They're only half asleep, you know. Half of their brain is still conscious. And it's utterly impossible to tell a real Protean from a fake one."

"Can't we simply keep shooting till we kill off all the real ones?"

"It'd be like cleaning up the Asteroid Belt with a bucket," Gerry said in a hopeless voice. "We've got to identify the real ones and--well, I don't want to kill them unless it's necessary. They'd be no good to either of us dead. If we can awaken them--"

"We can't wake 'em up without identifying them," Quade said. "And we can't identify 'em without waking them up. Lord."

"Well, you can be sure this isn't a real Protean," Gerry said, as a shaggy, apelike figure lumbered over the rise toward them. "It's a Hyclops! Where's your rifle?"

The Hyclops, native to Ganymede, stands more than twelve feet high, is terrifyingly covered with hair, and has four arms. Its three one-eyed heads bear murderous fangs that protrude from a slobbering, loose-lipped mouth. "Get the eyes," Gerry yelled, scurrying to one side. "We haven't any super-explosive bullets, but--aim at the eyes."

"You're telling me," Quade grunted, dashing in the other direction. He whirled, crouched on one knee, pumped bullets at the monster. The Hyclops charged on, foam frothing from its slaving mouth. The huge, shaggy arms clawed at the air.

One bullet found its mark. The right head lost its eye and lolled uselessly on the fatty neck. The creature let out a soundless bellow of agony and whirled toward Quade. If this was a dream, the man thought, it was certainly one hell of a nightmare!

Quade scampered away. He caught a flashing glimpse of the monster towering above him, huge as a colossus, the mighty arms clutching. Quade dived between the pillarlike legs, shuddering at what might happen if a taloned hand closed on his space suit. In that cyanogen atmosphere, he'd die almost before the Hyclops crushed him.

Gerry's bullet found the center head. The huge monster shrieked silently and jerked erect. The remaining head lifted. Gerry fired again.

The Hyclops collapsed. Like a bag of deflated skin, it slumped down and fell on Quade. The man had only time for one frantic thought of impending destruction before he was smashed flat. He tried to roll

aside--

And the Hyclops vanished. It disappeared into thin air. It was gone like the figment of a dream that it was.

"This is doing me no good," Quade said, rising unsteadily to his feet. "Suppose I'd wanted that head--or those heads, I mean--for my mantelpiece."

Gerry laughed somewhat bitterly. "Imagine how a real big-game hunter feels. Come on. Let's hurry, before Tommy uses his imagination again."

A new phase entered the situation. Mirages seemed to dance indistinctly all about them. Vague, half-seen images flickered in the distance and were gone--flashing pictures of alien worlds Tommy Strike had once seen--bizarre monsters, strange faces, some that were recognizable.

On they went, under the strange white sky of the comet. The seething, colossal tides of flame roared and swept above them. It was weird beyond all imagination. The two might have imagined themselves the last humans in the Universe, tracking a barren waste beneath the cosmic fires of creation.

Once they saw, or thought they saw, Gerry herself running rapidly but getting nowhere. This, too, dissolved.

"If I meet myself," Gerry said unhappily, "I'll go crazy. How much farther is it?"

"Not far," Quade comforted. "What's this, now?"

Apparently Tommy Strike had once more had delirium tremens. At least, the monster approaching looked like nothing that ever existed

anywhere. It was a sea-serpent, twenty feet long, writhing rapidly toward them with vast jaws agape. But luckily it disappeared before guns could be drawn.

Quade and Gerry reached the ship without further mishap. Morgan greeted them, helping them off with the bulky suits.

"That engine's still giving trouble," he observed. "We strained it badly, getting through the coma. And another motor's in need of overhauling."

"Has to be done," Quade said grimly. "We want to get off the comet alive. I need a drink."

He took Gerry to the control cabin. For some time they pondered, between pouring and drinking. But they did succeed in calming their battered minds to coherence.

"We can't move the ship," Quade said at length. "That's certain. Will any of those traps and snares of yours work on the Proteans?"

"You can't hypnotize a sleeping person," the woman said. "So the hypnotic lure wouldn't work. That's the toughest part of it. My traps are designed for living monsters, not dreams and dreamers. The heavy-range guns might work, but we can't drag them all the way to the tower. Also"--she glanced at a chronometer--"time's getting short. We're nearing the Sun. This comet is traveling plenty fast."

Quade lit a cigar of greenish, aromatic Lunar tobacco.

"Let's think. We've got to figure out a way of waking the seven sleepers so their phantom legions will vanish. Um-m. What is sleep, anyway?"

"There's more than one theory. The brain varies between the states

of excitation and relaxation. The greater the excitation, the sooner comes relaxation, or sleep. The seven Proteans are half awake and half asleep. Super-development of the brain causes that."

Quade nodded. "If we could irritate them enough to cause wakening-  
- Let's see. These creatures are highly evolved. Their outer membranes are composed of specialized cells. That means their nerve-endings must be extremely sensitive. And they live in a cyanogen atmosphere."

"Cyanogen," Gerry said, drawing a comb through tangled red hair. "If we could release a gas or a liquid chemical spray to change the cyanogen into something irritating, something that would wake up the sleepers--"

"We can't use the ship," Quade pointed out. "It would have to be portable. Um-m." He reached for a pad and pencil and made hasty notations.

" $(\text{cn})_2$  plus  $\text{o}_2$  yields nitrogen and carbon dioxide," the formula read. He showed it to Gerry.

"The Proteans are used to a cyanogen atmosphere. The carbon dioxide would be poisonous or suffocating to them. Maybe. It'd destroy all life on the comet, except us."

Gerry started convulsively. She snatched up the pad and figured quickly.

"Hold on. I think I've got it. Ammonium oxalate. Yeah. Look at this."

She showed Quade her notation. It read: " $(\text{cn})_2$  plus  $\text{h}_2\text{o}$  yields ammonium oxalate."

"Water?" Quade asked.



"Cyanogen plus water in the form of a simple spray would form ammonium oxalate. That salt isn't cyanide and would be a tremendous irritant to creatures living in cyanogen and its compounds. And the effect would be local. That's the answer. We've got it!"

Quade nodded slowly. "I think you're right. Sure! We'll use portable tanks and sprayers. I'll get Morgan."

He did so, and issued hasty instructions.

There was instant, orderly confusion. Portable tanks had to be filled. Hoses and spray-nozzles had to be prepared. But at last a skeleton crew of men was ready, Gerry and Quade at their head. A few were left to work on the engines, Morgan among them.

"We'll be back as soon as we can," Quade said. "In the meantime, my orders still stand. If we're not back before the deadline, take off without us."

Morgan shook his shaggy head.

"We're getting awful close to the Sun, Chief."

"I know," Quade shrugged. "I'm taking a few cameras with me, but I can't load up on bulky stuff. It'd slow us down too much. It looks like we'll get precious little for Von Zorn. And you won't get any monsters, either," he added to Gerry. She didn't say anything.

They set out at a furious, but more hopeful pace.

"We'll wear a trail to the tower pretty soon," Gerry said bitterly.

"Uh-huh. I wonder if that will work?" Quade pondered. "Plain water

doesn't sound like much of a weapon."

Ten minutes later his words seemed justified. A creature like a gigantic spider, six feet high and a dozen in diameter, rushed down a slope toward them. Its mandibles clicked viciously.

"The tanks," Gerry cried shrilly. "Try the water."

"Use your guns," Quade's deeper voice drowned her out. "Fire, everybody."

Pistols crashed loudly. At once the great spider was killed. But its body still raced forward, bowling over one man before it collapsed. Though its eyes had been smashed and it was blind, the mandibles still snapped in insensate fury, until it vanished from sight.

"There was no time for anything but bullets then," Quade explained. "But it looks like your chance is right here. There comes a blue globe."

One of the blue Proteans, only five feet in diameter, was rolling unsuspectingly toward them. On its surface-membrane a picture appeared--a picture of the spider that had just been killed.

Nobody said anything. The Protean hesitated, grew larger, and began to roll purposefully toward the group.

"Now." Gerry said.

Quade pointed the nozzle of his tank-tube. He turned a valve. The nozzle hissed shrilly. They stared hopefully, expectantly.



# Chapter VII.

"Forget the Guns"

It began to snow. Ammonium oxalate was precipitated out of the cyanogen atmosphere. It drifted down on the Protean, who did not seem discouraged in the least degree.

"Doesn't work," Quade groaned, and used his gun.

The blue monster deflated. But several more appeared. Again Quade tried the water-tank, with equal failure. Bullets finally slew the comet creatures.

"Well," Gerry said, as the last of them disappeared. "I don't know. Either I'm completely wrong, or else ammonium oxalate affects only real Proteans, not the dream-images. In that case we've got to find the real sleepers."

"All right," Quade acceded. "We'll keep on toward the tower. We'd better not use the tanks again till we're absolutely ready. The sleepers may not have been warned, so we don't want to show our hand too soon. If your idea's right, we'll be okay. If it's wrong, we're eclipsed."

Gerry said nothing, though she realized the truth of Quade's assertion. Doggedly the little group plodded on through the gray, gravelly soil. Several times they caught sight of additional Proteans. Once they viewed a Hyclops, in the distance, pursuing a group of fleeing red spheres.

"Looks like the blue Proteans have captured Tommy," Gerry remarked. "They're using his dream-visions in their crazy chess

game. Wonder what happened to the other men?"

Quade was wondering, too, and it wasn't a pleasant thought.

Gerry's thoughts were equally distressful. Tommy Strike was in serious trouble. She felt that her own rashness had been responsible for his present predicament. She kept seeing his face --

Abruptly, she muttered something suspiciously like an oath and took deadly aim at a Protean that had materialized nearby. It exploded into tatters. She felt slightly better.

Overhead the fires of the comet's coma seethed and churned. Beyond that white veil the Solar System moved in its accustomed orbits. Work was proceeding on the Ark. People were wandering through the London Zoo, gaping at Gerry's exhibits. Hollywood on the Moon was, as usual, buzzing with excitement. Everywhere television sets were discussing the comet, and the possible fate of the explorers who had vanished into its fires.

Not far away were all these friendly, familiar things--shut out by an impalpable wall of alien matter. Light-years away. Gerry, Quade, and the others were imprisoned on the comet, while the galactic wanderer rushed on toward the disastrous proximity of the Sun. And slowly, slowly, the time of grace shortened.

From the start, things had gone wrong. Perhaps, Gerry thought, it was her fault. But, then, nobody could have foreseen conditions on the comet. It was too far outside the ken of Earthmen. Gerry felt a touch of awe as she looked up at the weird sky, a realization of the vast, cosmic immensities that surround our Solar System. So much lay outside. So much was unknown, could never be understood by human minds!

She shrugged and plodded on. It didn't matter. The business of the day was something entirely different. This was more familiar, dealing with weapons, pitting the skill and intelligence of Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle against her enemies.

Quade's thoughts were rather similar. His keen brain was working, discarding possibilities, advancing theories, planning, plotting.

When they came in sight of the black tower, the minds of all the group were attuned to highest intensity.

Quade stopped.

"We don't know the full power or capabilities of the Proteans," he said quietly. "So watch yourselves. They may have purely mental weapons. Keep alert, and in touch with me. The minute anything seems to be going wrong, let me know."

They went down toward the monolith. It wasn't deserted now. Its base was hidden by thousands of the spheres, red and blue, united against a common foe. The Proteans waited, silent, alert, menacing....

The tension increased almost to the breaking point. Step by step, crunching their heavy space boots through the gravel, the party advanced. The enemy made no move. Silently they waited at the base of the ebon monolith, under the white, churning skies of flame.

Silence.... Ominous, torturing silence.

Quade's nerves were taut. He could feel the thrill of impending danger flooding through him, tugging at his mind, crying the nearness of peril. His hands swung loosely at his sides, never too far from the gun-butts. The rifle slung across his shoulder slapped his hips at each step. Gerry walked cautiously beside him. After them came the

men, bizarre figures with the big watertank cylinders jutting above their helmeted heads.

The nearest of the spheres was forty feet away. Thirty. Twenty-five....

The slope was not so steep now. Crunch, crunch went the metal boots. Hoarse breathing whistled through the audiophones.

"Chief," somebody whispered.

"Steady," Quade said. "Steady, fellas!"

Twenty feet separated the group from the Proteans. Fifteen.... Ten....

The interplanetary huntress and Quade strode confidently toward the massed ranks. He walked into a gap between two of the monsters. And they gave way.

Hesitation would have been fatal. Gerry and Quade kept on, and a path was cleared for him as he moved. One by one, two by two, the Proteans shrank away.

In his track came Gerry and the others. The tension was unendurable.

"Chief," a voice said, "they're closing up behind us."

"Let 'em," Quade snapped, and kept going.

The wall of the tower loomed just ahead. Gerry and Quade stepped over the threshold, stood for a second in the queer pale illumination streaming from within. The floor was carpeted with Proteans, some tiny, others six feet and more in diameter. Gerry could not see Tommy Strike or the others.

Another path of Proteans opened across the floor of the tower chamber. Through that Gerry and Quade advanced, in grim, deadly silence.

Forward they went, till they reached the center. There they paused.

At their feet lay five motionless figures, Earthmen all, unconscious and silent in their space suits and helmets. In a single glance, Gerry saw that they breathed. But the strange spell of dream held them fettered.

"Tommy!"

Gerry sprang forward, knelt beside Strike. She put her palms flat on the transparent helmet, as though she could feel through it the flushed face of the man.

As though, at a signal, the Proteans roused into activity. A stir of concerted movement rippled through the chamber. The spheres swayed, rocked. Suddenly they poured down on the Earthmen.

Quade's gun snarled without hesitation. The men fired a single, continuous roar of bullets.

But from the start it was hopeless. Like the fabled legions of Cadmus, the Proteans seemed to spring into existence from empty air. Strange dream-beings, given the attributes of matter and energy by the power of the black monolith. Dreams made real-living, dangerous, roused now to furious activity.

Quade saw two of his men go down under the onslaught. He blew a blue monster to fragments, shattered a red one. Then he also fell under the attack of a giant. It rolled completely over him and was gone. It had vanished.



White flakes drifted down against Quade's helmet.

He sprang up, somewhat dazed by his fall. He stared around.

The dream-legions had unaccountably thinned. At least half of them had vanished. But more were approaching, materializing from the air.

Standing above Strike's body, Gerry Carlyle was using her tank-and-hose. h<sub>2</sub>o--plain, ordinary water--spurted high in the cyanogen atmosphere, and the precipitated ammonium oxalate fell like snowflakes.

"Use your tanks!" Gerry shrilled. "Forget the guns."

Quade set the example. He twisted a valve, sent a fine spray of water shooting up. Immediately the others did the same. The salt had no effect on most of the Proteans.

But suddenly, without warning, a number of them snuffed out and were gone. Then a few hundred more disappeared.

"They're waking up," Gerry cried. "The seven sleepers--"

Seven sleeping Proteans, securely hidden among their materialized dreams, each identical with the originals. Now awakening came to them, one by one. Sensitive nerve-endings reacted to the irritant salt. No real Protean could remain in dreaming sleep under the circumstances. And whenever a real Protean awoke, his dreams vanished.

The hordes thinned. They were reduced quickly by leaps and bounds. Five hundred--two hundred--a few dozen--

Finally, seven spheres, four blue and three red, lay within the tower.

Quivering slightly, they shuddered under the attack of the irritant salt and began to roll toward the doorway.

Quade blocked their path, lifting his sprayer threateningly.

The Proteans hesitated, not knowing what to do.

"Turn off the water," Gerry commanded. "They won't go to sleep again. I'll try to communicate with them. I've learned how."

She turned the valve of her tank and advanced toward the nearest blue Protean. It waited helplessly. The five-foot sphere looked like nothing so much as a gigantic Christmas tree ornament, Quade thought absently.

Gerry wasn't saying anything, but the sphere was agitated. Pictures appeared on its surface membrane.

The woman turned to Quade.

"They're telepaths, you know. They can read strongly projected thoughts. And I can piece out what they mean, more or less, from the pictures they make."

There was another period of silence, while the strange, three-dimensional, color images flickered over the globe's bluish skin.

"It's all set," Gerry remarked at length. "Tommy and the others haven't been hurt. They'll wake up by themselves pretty soon. Feed 'em caffeine and brandy and they'll be ready to go."

"They're harmless now?" Quade said.

"Yes. As long as we don't squirt water on them, they'll play ball with us. The ammonium oxalate is complete torture to the Proteans."

The movie man was glancing at his chronometer. He audiophoned the ship, and conversed briefly with Morgan. Then he turned back to Gerry.

"Yeah," he said bleakly. "It's nearly deadline. By putting all the men to work muy pronto we may get the engines repaired in time to pull free of the comet. But as for shooting any pictures, I can't spare a man. Well, I'll shoot what background I can on the way back to the ship."

Gerry was communicating again with the Proteans.

"The Sun's proximity won't hurt these beasties," she said. "Apparently they can resist electric energy much better than we can." Her voice turned wistful. "Maybe we could come back to the comet after it rounds the Sun."

"Nope." Quade shook his head hopelessly. "No ship. Your Ark won't be ready till too late, and there's no other vessel. After we get through the coma again and pull away from the Sun—if we do—this boat of ours will need complete overhauling. When we leave Almussen's Comet, it means good-bye."

He pondered.

"Unless we can take some of the Proteans with us," he added at length. "Find out, will you?"

The woman conversed silently. Then she shook her head.

"They won't leave home. Although, I'll tell you what. Go back and get to work on the ship. Take Tommy and the others with you. Pick me up here when you take off, and I may be able to convince some of the Proteans in the meantime."

"Better get more than one," Quade said, "or you'll lose out."

The woman's eyes narrowed.

"I'll attend to that," she observed. "Scram."

But Quade still hesitated to leave.

"Sure you'll be safe?"

Gerry patted her water tank

"Plenty safe. My audiophone's working, anyway. But I guess you'd better leave Tommy Strike here with me."

Bearing their unconscious burdens, Quade and his men set out on the return journey. Luckily the gravity of the comet was so small that they were able to negotiate the trip without too much delay.

Once aboard the ship, every man pitched in and sweated and toiled over the motors. Even those who had been put to sleep were revived without trouble, and they also contributed their efforts. Yet Quade watched his chronometer worriedly.

It seemed hours before the final tests were completed. The reliability of the ship was still uncertain, but there was no time to waste. The deadline was already past.

Quade worked hurriedly at the controls. The craft lifted waveringly, and slid along thirty feet above the uneven surface.

Soon they sighted the tower. Quade landed beside it. From the monolith emerged Gerry, Strike, and two blue Proteans. The woman called Quade on the audiophone.

"Two of them will go with us. One for you, one for me. Let me in the ship, will you?"

"Swell," Quade replied, pressing a lever that opened the airlock nearest Gerry. "Hop aboard."

She and Strike complied. In the ship, they removed their helmets and rushed to the control room.

"Open the lock again," Gerry gasped. "Get cyanogen into it. The Proteans can't live in oxygen, so we'll have to keep 'em in the lock till we can fix up an air-tight room for them."

"Check."

Quade opened the lock, and the two Proteans hastily rolled into it. The valve shut after them.

Gerry had already scurried off to prepare a home for her cometary guests. Strike remained with Quade, mopping his brow.

"What an experience. Worse than going under ether, Tony. I've got the worst headache."

He fumbled in a closet for a pain-killer.

"You'll have a worse headache if luck isn't with us," Quade said grimly. "The deadline's past, Strike. I'm going to take the biggest chance I've ever taken in my life."

The other man turned.

"Eh?" he asked bewilderedly

Quade sent the ship arrowing up.

"We're a lot nearer the Sun than we should be. But this boat's too strained to stand up long in the electronic bombardment of the coma. We can't stay in it as long as we did before. Our only chance is to accelerate like hell and go straight through the thinnest part."

Strike's jaw dropped considerably.

"The thinnest part. You mean--"

"Yeah. The tail of a comet always points away from the Sun. The Sun's energy pushes at the comet's coma and tail. That means the thinnest section of the coma is directly opposite the tail on the side facing the Sun."

"Jumping Jupiter," said Tommy Strike weakly. "We break through at top speed, headed for the Sun. And we're inside Mercury's orbit?"

"Way inside. Tell your side-kick to get the Proteans out of the lock in a hurry or they'll be fried alive. Unless they can resist plenty of energy."

Strike departed in a frantic rush.

Quade crouched over the controls, his lean face grim and expressionless, a cold fire in his eyes. He was taking a long chance. But it was the only one. To remain on the comet an hour or two longer would mean certain destruction.

He jammed on more acceleration. The ship streaked up like a thunderbolt, heading for the turgidly flaming skies. Faster--faster--

He called Morgan, spoke briefly over his shoulder.

"Strap me in. Bandage me. I'm accelerating plenty."

The other man obeyed.

Quade, looking more like a mummy than a human being, snapped another order.

"Take care of the men. Ready them for acceleration."

Morgan nodded silently and went out.

Already the space devils were tearing at the ship. The struts groaned and shrilled under the terrific strain. But this was only the beginning, Quade knew. The real test would come later.

White fires loomed ahead. The coma! Quade jammed on more power, felt sickness tug at his stomach, felt his eyes press out of shape as the muscles strained to focus the delicate mechanism of vision.

And now they were in the coma.

Faster, faster! Added to the tremendous speed was the electronic bombardment that ripped at the fabric of the already weakened vessel. Once more the metal of the ship began to glow faintly. Again the craft yelled in shrill metallic protest.

The visiplat was a hell of raving white fire. It cleared without warning. In place of the curdled flames was a round, blazing disk. The Sun--

And the space ship was driving toward it at top acceleration.

Quade took a deep breath. Closing his eyes, he touched three buttons in rapid succession. Immediately he was flung sideward, as though by a giant's hand. Glass shattered throughout the ship. Light metal bent like putty. Men screamed in agony as ribs and small

bones cracked. Everyone was strapped into safety compartments, well padded, but those puny devices were far from enough.

The ship curved. At top speed it swerved away from the Sun. Quade had not dared decelerate, for the mighty mass of the Sun could overcome any number of gravity-screens at this small distance. The outer hull glowed flaming red. The straining motors hummed, rattled, hissed under the overload.

A pointer on a gauge before Quade hovered on a red line, went past it, hesitated, and crept slowly back. He breathed again. Gasping, he began to decelerate.

It was over. They were safe. They had fought against comet and Sun.

And they had won the fight!





# Chapter VIII.

## Double Double-Cross

Exactly one month later, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike were sitting in the woman's private office in the London Zoo, sipping cocktails and reading rave press notices.

"What a draw," Strike chortled. "Our blue Protean is drawing customers like flypaper."

"Uh-huh," the woman said happily. "And that isn't the best of it, either, I'm just waiting for a televisor call."

Strike put down a clipping.

"You've been gloating over this secret of yours for a month. What the devil is it?"

Gerry's answer was cut short as the televisor buzzed. She sprang up and answered it. On the screen appeared the simian, contorted face of Von Zorn.

"You chiseler," he yelped. "You double-crossing so-and-so. I'll sue you from here to Pluto."

Tommy Strike got in front of the screen.

"Listen, drizzlepuss, you're talking to a lady."

Von Zorn turned a brilliant green. "Ha, a lady! Would a lady palm off a dream on me? A Protean? What a laugh. For a month it acted all right. And now, right when I was making a speech at the Rotary Club with the thing on the table beside me—it vanishes. Just like that!"

Strike turned to see that Gerry was helpless with laughter. Feebly she reached up and turned off the televisor.

"You palmed off one of the fake Proteans on Von Zorn," Tommy accused.

"I told you they couldn't play me for a sucker," Gerry gasped, and exploded into a fresh outburst of merriment. "It's turn and turn about. They tricked me into giving 'em publicity. So I just turned the tables."

The televisor buzzed again. This time Strike turned it on. But it wasn't Von Zorn. It was, instead, Tony Quade, and he was looking surprisingly happy.

"Hello," he greeted cordially, removing a battered pipe from his firm mouth. "Everybody cheerful, I see. That's nice."

Gerry sobered suddenly. "Well?"

"Oh, nothing much. Von Zorn told you our little pet vanished, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"I just wanted to get it straight. You arranged with one of the Proteans to create a dream-duplicate, and for me to get the duplicate. And you fixed it up so my Proteans would disappear after a time. That right?"

"That," said Gerry, "is right. And I'm not apologizing."

"Oh, don't apologize," Quade said urbanely. "Everything's just fine. I wanted to show you this."

He lifted a three-sheet placard which read:

## Nine Planets Presents Call of the Comet

Produced and Directed by Anthony Quade Starring The Proteans and Gerry Carlyle

The woman gasped inarticulately. "It's a fake," she cried at last. "You only shot a few backgrounds on the comet."

"Yeah," Quade acknowledged. "But I managed to get acquainted with my dream Protean. He was as intelligent as his original, you know. He told me he was a fake, that he'd vanish after awhile. So I knew what to expect, and I took precautions."

"It's still a fake," Gerry said stubbornly.

"Think so? Remember how the Proteans communicate? By projecting colored, three-dimensional images on their skins. Those pictures can be photographed, Miss Carlyle.

"I got my Protean to think and project a complete photoplay--starring you--and we shot and transcribed it directly from Protean's membranous skin. I photographed a photoplay. I told you the creatures were intelligent.

"It's a perfect reproduction," Quade went on. "Nobody could tell it from the real thing. I've got the history of the Proteans, our arrival, your capture--everything that happened."

"It's illegal to pretend I'm in the picture," Gerry snapped furiously. "I know that, at any rate."

"You signed a contract in Von Zorn's office," Quade pointed out. "We've a perfect right to bill you as star of this picture." He grinned. "It'll be swell publicity for you, lady. And you don't deserve it."

Gerry breathed deeply. But the training of years stood her in good stead.

"At least, I've got the only Protean in existence in this System," she merely remarked. "That's something you can't swipe."

Quade chuckled maliciously.

"Yeah? How do you tell a real Protean from a dream one? The dream one vanishes. Yours hasn't vanished yet, has he?"

Gerry struck angrily at the television, shutting it off. She barked into an audiophone: "Peters! Peters! Is my Protean still there?"

"Sure," came an unseen voice. "Why shouldn't he be? He's rolling around in his tank of cyanogen, happy as a lark."

"Don't worry," Strike said, putting a capable arm around Gerry. "He's real enough."

The woman emitted a small groan.

"But is he? There's only one way of telling. If he vanishes, he's a fake."

"Well," said Tommy Strike, after thoroughly kissing his fiancée, "at least there's no danger of my vanishing. After all, what's a Protean or two?"

The words were unfortunate. Gerry seemed to regain her usual spirits. Her voice crackled like an electronic bombardment.

"Yes, indeed," she remarked coldly. "Just who were you dreaming about on that comet?"

Strike released the woman and headed for the door.

"See you later, honey," he said over his shoulder. "I'm off to Mars. I hear the mariloca are running...."

For some reason, "Catch-'em-Alive" Gerry Carlyle scampered frantically after him.