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SIREN SATELLITE

By ARTHUR K. BARNES

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CHAPTER I

Ill-Starred Voyage

Gerry Carlyle draped her very lovely form over the functionally-designed Plastair and nibbled moodily at a long, bronze curl. She had just discovered how vulnerable she was and, like all important public figures who happen to find themselves in such a situation, she was annoyed.

That she was important, no one could deny. Gerry Carlyle was perhaps the most famous woman on Earth. She was beautiful. She was rich. And she was amazingly successful in a profession so rigorous and exacting that not one man in a thousand would dare face the dangers and hardships and excitement that she faced almost daily.

Queen of the space-rovers, in her mighty ship, *The Ark*, this slim girl covered nearly the entire Solar System in her quest for exotic and weird life-forms to be returned alive for the edification and astonishment of the public at the London Interplanetary Zoo. Her name was a byword, and she was respected and loved throughout the System for her courage, as well as her femininity.

And yet, for all this, Gerry Carlyle was very vulnerable in one regard. Like all champions, she couldn't pass up a dare or a challenge, no matter what its nature. She had to take on all comers, and she had just realized that fact.

"The nerve of that fellow!" she muttered, then looked up in annoyance at her fiancé, Tommy Strike. "You're none too sympathetic, either. What are you pacing around for?"

Strike was medium tall, and darkly good-looking in a rugged sort of way. He grinned tolerantly at her, the grin that always made her heart stumble.

"Just trying out the new flooring," he said.

The pilot room and main corridors of *The Ark* had just been refloored with zincal, the new metal, plastic, air bubble combination which gave under the foot like an expensive rug, but which never showed signs of wear.

Gerry pouted.

"Well, you might show a little interest," she said. "After all, you're second in command around here." But Gerry was not the pouting kind, so the pout was not very successful.

"You've been mumbling to yourself for the past half hour," Tommy Strike pointed out. "How do you expect me to know what it's all about? If you care to commence at the commencement, in words of one syllable, so my dull wits can grasp whatever it is that has so upset you, perhaps I'll listen."

Gerry gave her man a smoky, heavy-lidded glance, smiled, and made room for him on the Plastair.

"It's this fellow Dacres," she began. "He came around the other day with a business proposition. Said he wanted to use *The Ark* to rescue his brother whose expedition has apparently cracked up on Triton. He offered to finance the whole thing, with me furnishing the regular crew. He would simply be a passenger. Naturally, I turned him down. Gerry Carlyle does not run a taxi service.

"Triton, eh?" Strike grunted. "Neptune's only satellite. And with a very nasty reputation. Isn't that the place that's never been explored?"

"That's the place, all right. Two or three expeditions tried it. None ever returned."

"Oh, yeah. I remember reading about that. They call it the 'siren satellite.' Very dramatic. And also a very long way from here. Your pal Dacres must be well off to be able to afford such a jaunt."

Gerry tossed her blond hair.

"He's no pal of mine!" she said, hotly. "Wait till you hear what he did! He's blackmailing me!"

"Ah?"

"He's gone to all the papers and telefilm services and spread the story that I refused to rescue Dacres' brother because the rumors about Triton have scared me off. How do you like that?"

She leaned over, snapped the telenews switch, and pointed to the wall-screen. A headline flashed on.

GERRY CARLYLE SPURNS RESCUE PLEA!

Angrily, Gerry spun a dial to reveal a second lead.

**QUEEN OF HUNTRESSES SHIES AWAY FROM
TRITON CHALLENGE!**

Miss Gerry Carlyle, the Catch-'em-Alive girl renowned the world over for her adventures while raiding the Solar System for weird monsters, today rejected the plea of Lawrence Dacres that she put her spaceship, *The Ark*, at his disposal for the rescue of his brother, believed lost on Triton.

Mr. Dacres alleges that fear of unknown forces upon the lonely, unexplored satellite of Neptune prompted the refusal.

It is true that Triton's record of being the grave of more than one ill-fated expedition is cause enough to make anyone wary. But if, as is asserted, something has been discovered at last which gives pause to the redoubtable Miss Carlyle, then man, indeed, bites dog.

Gerry's furious fingers again moved, and a third line of heavy type declared:

SWEETHEART OF SPACE SHUNS SIREN SATELLITE!

Strike sniggered. Gerry interrupted.

"I had a few words with the editor who dreamed that one up," she said with quietly vicious satisfaction. "He is now resting in a sanitarium."

Strike sighed.

"I can see what an awkward position it puts you in," he admitted. "The Dacres fellow's already tried the case in the press and found you guilty of something or other."

He rose, walked around behind Gerry. Presently his voice came again, musingly.

"Now let's see. Triton. Diameter, three thousand miles. Revolution, five days, seven hours, three minutes. Stellar magnitude—"

"You sound like an encyclopedia." Gerry twisted around, trying to see.

"That's because I'm reading from an encyclopedia, I'll bet.... Stellar magnitude at opposition, thirteen. Retrograde motion. Gravity, two and a half times that of Earth—Oh, yeah. That's why they call it the 'siren satellite.' It lures the unwary space-traveller close, then hauls him in with the unexpected gravity.... Mmm. Composed of matter not native to the Solar System—hence the terrific mass. Believed to be a wanderer from space trapped by Neptune. That would explain the retrograde motion."

Brisk, muffled footsteps sounded along the corridor, followed by an impatient knock on the pilot room door.

"That'll be friend Dacres now." Gerry grimaced. "Come in!"

Dacres made his entrance. He was not self-important, but he was imposing, and whenever he entered a room he would inevitably command attention. He was tall, slender in the manner of a rapier, and blond. He bowed stiffly.

"Good morning, Miss Carlyle," he said.

Gerry almost expected to hear his heels click. She introduced the two men, mentally compared them, as all women do.

"So you've come to apologize for your insufferable conduct?" she said then.

"I've come to see if you have reconsidered your unfriendly and uncooperative attitude," he amended.

Gerry began to incandesce.

"Why, you—you—" she could scarcely contain herself. "You deliberately spread lies and false insinuations through the press, making me a laughing-stock, blasting my reputation, impugning my courage! And now you have the crust to pretend that I'm in the wrong for not throwing my whole organization into the lap of every would-be joyrider who comes along! You're nothing but a blackmailer!"

Dacres refused to be stampeded.

"Sorry to exert pressure on you in such fashion, Miss Carlyle," he said, unperturbed. "As you imply, however, I have no scruples. None, at least, when my brother's life is at stake."

Gerry found it hard to answer that one. She had tried unsuccessfully to answer it ever since Dacres had first spoken to her. The blond man knew this, and pursued his advantage.

"While we argue here," he pointed out, "my brother and his crew may be dying—slowly being crushed flat by the terrible gravity. He weighed two hundred on Earth. Up there, he'd weigh five hundred. The human heart simply cannot stand that kind of punishment. It'll quit."

The words conjured an unpleasant picture of freezing, starving men crawling painfully about like injured crabs, praying for quick release from agony. Gerry winced.

"Weren't the explorers equipped with de-grav units?" she asked.

"Yes, but how long will they last? A couple of weeks at low power, possibly. Then—" Dacres brought his palms together with slow expressiveness. "That's why every second is precious."

Gerry felt cornered, and she glanced at Tommy Strike in an exasperated appeal for reinforcement. But Strike was strictly neutral. If anything, he found her predicament amusing, taking a perverse delight in seeing her humbled by the opposite sex.

She made one last try.

"Why pick on me, Mr. Dacres?" she asked. "Why is it so essential to have my ship, and only mine?"

"Rocket ships visiting Triton, however powerful, have so far all cracked up. Complete safety demands the tremendous power of a centrifugal flyer, like *The Ark*. How many such ships exist today? A handful. And how many of those are owned by other than government agencies? Only yours, Miss Carlyle. If you refuse me, I shall have to try and find a lesser ship. But I'm staking a great deal on having publicly put you into an intolerable position, so you can't afford to turn me down."

Gerry gasped. The fellow was certainly frank about it. What's more, he seemed to have all the answers. If she were ready to quit her romantic and risky business and settle down, she

could safely say no. But as long as she wished to remain queen of the space-rovers, she dared not let a single questionable act stain her record.

She looked despairingly at Strike, but he simply shrugged, grinning faintly.

"Well, here we go again," he said.

Dacres tendered an olive branch.

"There might, of course, be some interesting alien life-forms on Triton. After the rescue is completed, you'd be welcome to try for a couple of specimens, if that would enable you to—er—save face."

Gerry felt her temperature climb to a new high, and she counted ten, then stood up.

"You are insulting, Mr. Dacres," she announced. "I do not like you. The only reason my fiancé has not knocked you down is because he feels I sometimes think too highly of myself, and that a dressing down does me good. However, your brother's peril and your own machinations force me to accept your proposition. Come back in an hour with your checkbook and your attorney. Our contract will be ready for you. We can leave at dawn."

Dacres bowed again, very tall and ever so slightly triumphant.

"Thank you," he said. "I regret our inability to be friends but, after all, that is unimportant. I'm sure we'll manage a successful and uneventful voyage."

He stalked out, ramrod-stiff.

"Whew!" Strike shook himself like a big dog. "The electric potential of this room must be terrific. Think I'll go outside and ground myself. I've never seen a fellow so completely right every time he opens his mouth. Most disconcerting."

And Tommy Strike gave out with a roar of accumulated laughter.

Lawrence Dacres seemed to have been in error once, however, when he predicted a journey without incident. Just before reaching Mars, five of *The Ark's* crew became violently ill after dinner.

"Food poisoning," was the verdict in the Martian hospital. The men were out of danger and would be released in two or three days, but as *The Ark* had left Earth with only a skeleton crew, in order to save expense, a serious problem was now at hand. Dacres, frantic at delay which cost him hundreds of dollars a day, suggested that he recruit replacements at the Martian spaceport.

"We must get under way at once, Miss Carlyle," he said, "or I'll go broke just waiting here. After all, it wasn't your key men who became ill, just subordinates. The chief engineer, for instance, is all right. He could get along with new men for just this one trip."

It was true. On a routine journey such as this, Gerry had no need of the special qualifications and training which made those sick men expert hunters, trappers, and zoologists, as well as engineers. Any good mechanics could replace them.

So she agreed. But she couldn't help feeling that, conceived in anger and already stricken with misfortune, the expedition was ill-starred.

CHAPTER II

Intrigue in Space

It was Tommy Strike who, several hours out from Mars, stumbled upon the extraordinary and amusing scene which suggested that the journey was indeed fated to be anything but routine. Glancing in through a half-open door in the crew's quarters, he observed a man, a total stranger, going through weird antics. The newcomer was holding his head very gingerly between his hands, as if it were about to explode, and walking around the small but comfortable room with awkwardly high steps.

The man glared at himself in the mirror, and Strike grinned at the homely reflection the man saw. It was epitome of the battered, broken-down boxer—flat nose, lumpy cheeks, scar tissue under the brows, cauliflower ears.

The man with the clownish face now staggered to a porthole to look out. Then he reeled back with a stricken, bewildered expression. He groaned piteously, obviously in the grip of a hangover to end all hangovers.

Strike leaned quietly against the door jamb, to watch. Gradually, both he and the broken-down pugilist became aware of voices in the next room, voices hushed but intense. The ex-bruiser wobbled over to the door and cocked his tin ear.

"Monk, you fool!" came the voice. "How the devil did that tramp get aboard?"

There was a shuffle of feet.

"Boss, I swear I dunno," came the conciliatory reply. "We didn't expect you right away, so we was havin' ourselves a time."

"A drunken carousal, you mean?"

"Okay, have it your way. Anyhow, when your message came, we headed for the spaceport, but everything was pretty happy, see, an' this fellow must have got sort of attached to the party, an' —" Monk's voice trailed away. "As a matter of fact, I don't much remember exactly what did happen."

"So when you checked in, seven souse-pots instead of six, no one thought anything of it. Beautiful!" The invisible speaker was very bitter. "Well, the tramp's aboard now, and the damage is done. I suppose I should have met you myself. Question is —"

The lumpy-faced man suddenly shoved open the door. It was like a French farce, with Strike able to see all that happened, while remaining unobserved. Six tough-fisted mechanics, the men recruited by Dacres in the emergency, were looking very ill at ease as Dacres tongue-lashed them. Strike frowned slightly. He would have to remind the tall, blond Dacres that it was the captain alone who had the right to discipline the men.

Then the unidentified, clown-faced man spoke.

"You!" he snapped out. "Who're you?"

"Lawrence Dacres, and keep a civil tongue in your head."

"You shanghai'd me aboard this here spaceship, Dacres, an' I demand you turn around and take me back to Mars pronto.

Or else!"

There was a round of mirth, and Strike moved nearer to watch the rest of the scene. The strange, lumpy-faced man purpled.

"I mean it," he declared. "D'you know who I am?"

"Don't tell us. Let us guess." The heavy irony came from Monk, the man who had been trying to explain how the extra person had come aboard at the spaceport. He had a receding forehead and long, hairy arms.

"I'm Kid McCray, the Martian middleweight champion, that's who!"

The crewmen dissolved into the helpless hilarity of complete disbelief, and Strike fought back his own urge to laugh. Middleweight McCray ranted and stormed, trying to convince them of his sincerity. It was useless. In fury, he doubled his fists and sprang at Dacres.

However, Strike decided, whatever ring experience McCray might have had didn't include the trickiness of moving out in space. His lunge carried him well off the floor. He sailed, floundering, like a man in deep water, awkward and off balance. In this defenseless position, the blond man's punch caught him flush on the jaw and slammed him head-first against the steel wall.

McCray took a full count.

"Nobody can do this to me," he muttered dizzily, and was still shaky when he managed to stand again.

The crew men were weeping in their joy.

"The champ's off form today!" the guffawing Monk yelled.
"He ain't so good in the light gravity!"

Strike thought it about time to intervene, so he stepped into the room. There was a sudden silence of frozen attitudes and wary eyes.

"Oh, Captain Strike," Dacres said, relaxing. "Glad you're here. If you overheard what's been going on, you realize that we have a stowaway aboard with some peculiar notions in his head."

"I understand, Dacres." Strike tried to look sternly at the groggy, clown-faced McCray. "Just how *did* you get on the ship?"

"Well," — McCray screwed up his face in thought — "Well, there was the fight, see? First championship bout ever held on Mars. I win by a kayo in the eleventh. Then we celebrated — parties, taverns, lots o' girls.... Then I don't remember nothin' till a few minutes ago." He looked very baffled.
"Doncha believe me?"

Obviously, the various celebrants had somehow formed into one big party during the gay evening. It sounded like a fight night. There probably had been a fight. But as for a man with a face like McCray's being a champion —

Strike and Dacres exchanged sad smiles, and Dacres made a cranking motion with one finger to his temple.

"Perhaps a few weeks' work will straighten out your thinking, McCray," Strike said. "We'll go and see my partner, and you'd better act sensibly because technically you're subject to severe penalties. Here. Slip these on."

He kicked over a pair of gravity clogs—thick metal plates containing a power unit to adjust the wearer against differing gravities. Straps fastened them to the feet. Everyone else was wearing them. They enabled scrambled-ears McCray to follow Strike and Dacres up the long corridor to the elevator leading to the flight deck.

Tommy Strike noted with satisfaction McCray's reaction, as the pugilist's eyes fell on the glorious, copper-blond beauty of the ship's famous mistress.

"Holy Smoke!" McCray goggled at her. "You're Gerry Carlyle!"

In the questioning silence that followed, Strike explained.

"We have a stowaway, Gerry," he said. "Unintentional. Says he came aboard by mistake in a moment of alcoholic aberration. No one of us realized he wasn't one of the new men. He seems to be a bit punch-drunk."

The uninvited guest snapped out of it with a roar.

"Punch-drunk?" he yelled. "Listen, you! I'm Kid McCray, middleweight champ of Mars! I got influence, an' if you don't take me back to Mars right now, there'll be trouble!"

Strike, Dacres, and Gerry Carlyle doubled over with laughter.

"O-oh-h!" gasped the girl. "Those Martian liquors! I've heard they frequently bring on delusions of grandeur!"

However cool a ringman McCray might once have been, he had now had too much. He advanced vengefully upon Strike, his every thought written plainly on his battered face. Remembering his earlier experience, the fighter shuffled forward with determined caution. As a result, Strike found him practically a sitting duck.

Being in the light-heavyweight class, Strike promptly accepted the challenge and clubbed the intruder with a whistling right cross.

McCray spun round, fought clumsily for balance on the gravity clogs, then crashed, bouncing his head off the binnacle. "This just ain't possible," he muttered faintly.

"The 'champ,'" Dacres declared in an amused voice, "isn't so good with the foot-work this morning."

"Overtrained, perhaps," offered Gerry.

There was more gaiety.

"Well, we can't put back to Mars, of course," Strike said then. "Better put him to work."

Actually, Strike was not at all sorry. McCray was probably in for some amusingly rough and humiliating hours. He would be assigned to the most menial tasks. He would be referred to derisively as "the Champ." He would have to learn that Space Law dealt ruthlessly with men with too-ready fists. But *The Ark* was on a grim mission, and Strike felt sure that McCray, once he found his place, would be good for many tension-relieving laughs....

Kid McCray was surprisingly persistent, however. Two days later, he button-holed Strike and urged him to radio Mars, on the theory that if there were a missing middleweight champion, that might prove his story.

"Too bad you didn't think of that before," Strike smothered a grin and pointed out solemnly. "We're already too far from Mars for the limited capacity of our ship's radio."

No whit discouraged, McCray again petitioned the captain next day. He had learned the story of Dacres' brother, and the peculiar, untimely illness which had reduced the crew of *The Ark*.

"Don't that seem kinda odd, Captain?" insisted McCray, striving to look mysterious. "An' could anybody be so lucky as to find a half-dozen number-one mechanics on Mars at a moment's notice? Maybe we better turn back right now!"

Strike got endless amusement from the little battles of wits in which McCray clumsily offered varied reasons for returning to Mars. But the ex-fighter's point about Dacres' substitute crewmen stuck in his mind. He remembered, too, the conversation he'd overheard the day McCray had awakened on the ship. The exact words escaped him, but hadn't Dacres been speaking as if to long-time acquaintances? The sudden silence, the suspicious looks when he shoved open the door and entered the room—had they meant anything?

Feeling very foolish, Strike dropped down to talk with Baumstark, the chief engineer, and was quickly reassured.

"It's working out fine, sir," the engineer said. "The new fellows are really topnotch engine men, especially that

Monk. Not much to look at, but always asking questions. Probably could run the ship himself right now!"

After that, even McCray seemed to give up trying, tending strictly to business, as the mighty ship fled at astronomical speeds through the vast remoteness of the spaceways. Days drifted into weeks. One by one, the major planets' orbits passed astern. Then, another of those queerly unrelated incidents ruffled the surface of the quiet routine.

McCray was involved, as usual. On an inspection tour, Strike came upon him sprawled on the floor of one of the cabins, nursing a welt above his ear. Standing over him was Monk, a wrench in one hand and a wicked-looking proton pistol in the other.

"Nosey!" Monk was shouting. "Buttinsky! What's the idea?"

McCray explained fuzzily that he had just been searching for a tool in Monk's space-bag, and accidentally found the gun.

"Well, next time ask me first," Monk cried. "Besides, finding I got a gun is nothin' to get excited about. We're goin' to a strange world, an' it might be dangerous, see? We might need some weapons."

Tommy Strike chose that moment to make his presence known. He lashed Monk verbally, took the gun from him.

"It's the officers' duty to take care of the arsenal aboard this ship. No weapons are ever permitted in the men's quarters."

Monk scuffed his feet, made a handsome apology, and he and McCray went back to work. Strike watched them pensively, recalling past events, wondering if there were a pattern. On impulse, he searched the belongings of Dacres' recruits, and

found exactly nothing out-of-the-way. Sheepishly, he returned to the flight deck, resolved not to bother Gerry with his unworthy suspicions.

That proved a mistake. The mystery came to a sudden and explosive head before the next changing of the watch. They were only one day out from Triton, and Gerry was making telescopic observations of the satellite.

"I've checked Triton's rotational speed, Tommy," she said. "It spins once around on its axis every forty-five minutes or so. Really rolling down this cosmic bowling alley, eh?"

Those were the most important words Strike had ever heard in his life, though he did not realize it then. Instead, he made idle conversation.

"Yes," he said, "but there's precedent for it. Look at Jupiter—twenty-nine times as large as this marble, counting its atmospheric envelope, rotating once in a bit over nine hours."

As if the words were a cue, the door burst open, and Dacres, Monk, and the other substitute crewmen shouldered through. All were armed. In a split second, the entire plot, portions of which had been tantalizing Strike for days, was clear.

"So," said Gerry Carlyle, "it's mutiny."



"So," said Gerry Carlyle, "it's mutiny."

Dacres nodded, smiling, and interpreted correctly her quick glance down the hall.

"It's no use," he said. "All the others have been bound and gagged."

CHAPTER III

Murder With Mathematics

Half of Strike's mind boiled with astonishment and self-revilement. It was his fault. He should have known. McCray had practically proved this was coming, but he had insisted on laughing the fellow off as a "character." He had been criminally blind and stupid.

Yet the other part of his brain admitted his actions had only been natural, that no one in his senses would have credited Dacres with the foolhardy idea of stealing the most famous spaceship in the entire System. It was just crazy.

Dark-faced with fury, Strike put this thought into words.

"Just what d'you think you're going to do, anyhow?"

"We're taking over *The Ark*, camouflaging it, and using it for a short career of piracy among the Outer Planets. Perhaps a half-dozen quick strikes, then we all retire wealthy before the law even starts to hunt."

There it was, beautifully simple, grim, dastardly.

"And what about us?" asked the girl.

"So sorry." Dacres smiled hypocritically. "You and your crew will be packed into a lifeboat and marooned on Triton. Another regrettable accident to another would-be explorer of the 'siren satellite'."

"That's murder!" Strike lashed out. "We'll die there, horribly, crushed flat by that gravity."

Dacres warned Strike back with his gun.

"Tut, tut, Captain," he said. "You didn't think we could afford to leave you alive, to carry tales to any possible rescue parties, did you? It's all part of my scheme. Everything must appear accidental."

Strike looked at his fiancée, and was never prouder of her. If the mutineers expected tears or hysteria, they must have been shocked at the hardy defiance of her next remark.

"You're a fool, Dacres, if you don't kill us all right now."

There was implacable hate in the girl's voice, but Dacres merely grinned.

"Oh, no, Miss Carlyle," he said. "No shooting. No hint of foul play. I see what's in your mind. You foresee furious rescue operations when *The Ark* becomes overdue. Naturally, Triton will be searched, and you intend to leave an explanatory message where it will be easily found.

"Spare yourself the trouble, please. We'll give you a few days —it'd be interesting to see just how long the human heart can endure such strain—then visit your little tomb on Triton. Any messages subsequently found will be written by me, neatly explaining the destruction of *The Ark* in space, with no suggestion of criminal action."

Hopelessness was a knot in Strike's stomach. The plot was really ironclad. But even now Gerry seemed unshaken. She looked around the group of thieves and murderers as if memorizing their faces for future reference. Then she saw McCray, hiding shamefacedly in the rear. Her eyebrows raised.

"You, too, 'Champ'? I'm disappointed."

The pugilist crimsoned.

"The 'Champ' had a silly idea that he could remain neutral in this game," Dacres explained easily. "We can use a muscular man, so we gave him his choice. He chose to live, with us."

Gerry nodded.

"Just for curiosity," she said, "do you really have a brother?"

"No. The lost expedition was just window-dressing. Rather nicely done, I thought. We actually arranged for a ship to leave Mars a few months ago under my charter, in case you checked on it."

"Swine!" Gerry Carlyle spat the word, and swung her right fist in a haymaker that caromed off Dacres' nose. Holstering his gun, he wiped his watering eyes and started for Gerry.

At that instant, something happened to McCray. It seemed to Strike that the man's natural instincts as a fighter and sportsman got tangled up with his admiration for a beautiful girl. At any rate, moving expertly now on his clogs, he slid before Gerry.

"Look, lady," he said. "Always hit straight, not roundhouse. Like this."

Then he cracked the blond man a beautiful punch, flush on the button. Dacres fell, out cold. Instantly, Strike whirled on Monk, who was about to draw a bead.

"Remember what he said!" he shouted. "No gunplay!"

For heart-stopping moments, sudden death trembled in the air, as Monk squinted murderously at McCray down the

glittering rod of his proton pistol. McCray drew breath again only when Monk drew back with a harsh laugh.

"Okay, bum," Monk said. "It's only a matter o' hours, anyways. Seein' as how you decided to play with the losin' team!"

Strike almost smiled when he saw McCray's transparent face register appalled realization. Kid McCray gulped, looked anxiously at Gerry Carlyle, and then grinned broadly as she winked at him in wordless thanks.

"Oh, well," he said, strutting ever so faintly, "it ain't *when* a fellow goes, it's *how* he goes!"

It was plain Kid McCray considered himself in distinguished company.

Tommy Strike examined his sweaty palms, marked where the nails had dug in when he fought down the suicidal impulse to fling himself at Dacres' piratical crew. Then he looked around the cramped confines of the tiny lifeboat.

Though intended for six, nine persons were packed in the craft. Save for the slap-happy boxer, McCray, whose heart was certainly bigger than his brains, all the occupants were intimate friends, welded together in a unit by adventure and danger, failures and successes. Young Barrows, Kranz, Baumstark—with all of them their proudest boast was that they were envied members of Gerry Carlyle's entourage.

And now had come the ignominious end of the trail. After each recent hairbreadth exploit, Strike had vowed he would wed Gerry and they would settle down on some peaceful suburban estate. But the demons of excitement in their blood had not been conquered. So, seemingly, the pitcher had gone once too often to the well. Death was the end of this adventure, sure and horrid. And Strike felt himself to blame.

The seething silence, brought on by the enormity of Dacres' daring to lay a hand upon their beloved leader, was broken by Kranz.

"I hear the gravity down there is two-and-a-half Gs," he said. "We might as well make a break for it right now. Go down fighting, anyhow."

Strike shrugged.

"It's no use. Dacres has —"

A sudden thought made Strike examine the fuel gauge, but though there was enough fuel to take them to Triton, there was not nearly enough to enable them to try a dash for the nearest outpost in the Uranian System. He ground his teeth.

"No, that bird has thought of everything," he sighed. "I said that the first day I talked to him. It's still true."

"Exception, please," Gerry interposed suddenly. "Mr. Dacres has forgotten one thing — mathematics. Just take it quietly, men. Our inning may yet come."

Tommy Strike and the others stared at her, forlorn hope fighting with despair. He couldn't see any value in calculus when a man suddenly found himself crushed to the ground by a weight of four hundred and fifty pounds. It would be a

task even to pick up a pencil. He was about to argue the matter when a sudden lurch threw them all into a tangle at one end of the little rocket-car. It was too late for debate now — Dacres had thrown the lever catapulting the lifeboat into space.

To the tiny craft's left, and slightly above, *The Ark*, enormous and glittering, receded with uncanny effortlessness. Below and to the right, dollar-size in the cold blackness of interstellar space, the Siren Satellite beckoned irresistibly.

Strike slid into the pilot's seat, for once at a loss as to what to do, and stared at Gerry questioningly. She nodded.

"Triton," she said.



The tubes bucked with miniature thunder, as Strike deftly manipulated the controls. It was but a three-hour journey, but it loomed as the most frightful three hours any of them had ever dreamed of enduring.

While still an hour out from Triton, the pull of that mighty gravity was already making itself felt. If anyone had

occasion to move, he took slow, ponderous steps. The increasing weight was endurable while lying prone, but even so there were whimpers, as invisible but relentless fingers seemed striving to tear loose the internal organs themselves. Barrows was suddenly sick on the floor, and the sight promptly urged three of the others to follow suit.

Strike wound a coil of light rope around himself as an abdominal support. It afforded some relief, but nothing could take the terrible strain from his heart, as it laboriously fought to pump the sluggishly heavy blood through pinched veins. He speculated dispassionately on how long a heart would hold up.

He glanced at Gerry. She lay with her face hidden in her arms, breathing asthmatically. Slowly, her head raised, as if it weighed a ton.

"Tommy," she spoke thickly, with a tongue that would not obey. "I'm going to—pass out. Head toward—equator—"

She slumped. Though Gerry was vigorous and athletic, her frame was never intended to sustain the ordeal it was subject to now.

Strike saw the others, especially McCray, were taking it fairly well. Most of them had endured several Gs for short moments while stunting or test-flying, but none had ever experienced anything like this ceaseless drag which crushed the chest and threatened to pull the very flesh away from the bones.

Sweat blinded Strike momentarily, and with a leaden hand he wiped it aside. Triton, pale and featureless, loomed large now, revolving with visible motion. The crisis was at hand. The tiny lifeboat plunged with sickening speed, and Strike fought the controls with corded muscles. The jets blasted full in a savage battle against the gravity, and it took all Strike's skill to keep the ship from rolling off its delicate position atop that vital column of flame.

As the craft thundered in over the swiftly sliding terrain, only luck averted disaster, for Strike's anchored fingers were too slow for the exacting manipulation of a landing. The craft plowed in fast and hard, swathed in flame, skidding with bone-racking jerks.

The lifeboat made one complete somersault and came to rest—right side up.

The nine castaways sorted themselves out, untangled broken safety belts, stood up, and—suddenly, the realization of a miracle dawned upon them!

Like a bestowing of a soothing, deific benison, the grip of that terrifying, crushing gravity was gone. Utterly gone!

They weighed no more, apparently, than they ever had on Earth!

Each gave thanks or expressed his joy in his own way, but the dominant emotion was aptly expressed by McCray.

"Gosh!" he said. "I don't get it!"

None of the men understood the phenomenon, but a horrible suspicion was growing in Strike's mind. He turned to stare at Gerry, who had revived at once with no ill effects.

"You knew this was going to happen!" he said accusingly. "That's what you meant when you babbled about Dacres and his mathematics. Why didn't you tell us, spare us some of the mental agony?"

"Sorry," Gerry blushed faintly. "But I wasn't at all sure. It would have been an awful disappointment if it hadn't come off."

"Never mind that. What's the angle? Out with it! How come?"

Gerry grinned in reply to this bombardment of queries.

"Patience, m'lord, and I shall demonstrate." She found pencil, paper, and slide-rule and commenced calculating. "The key to the problem is the fact that Triton's rotation, once every forty-five minutes, develops a centrifugal force at the equator, the thrust of which neutralizes the pull of its high gravity. Now suppose you weigh a hundred and fifty pounds."

"But I weigh a hundred and eighty-three," objected Strike.

"Okay, okay. Just pretend, hunh? So you'd expect to weigh three seventy-five here. But—" Gerry scribbled.

weight = 150 pounds

diam. of Triton = 3000 miles = 1.584×10^7 ft.

radius of Triton = 7.92×10^6 ft.

gravity = 2.5 g

rotation 45 minutes.

$N = 1/45 = .0222$ rpm

$$\omega^{[1]} = 2\pi N/60 = .00233 \text{ rad/sec}$$

$$m = 150/g = w/32.2 = 4.81 \text{ slugs}$$

"A slug is actually the name of the engineering unit of mass," Gerry interrupted herself to explain—quite unnecessarily as most of the others were well grounded in math.

$$\text{Centrifugal Force} = m r \omega^2 = 4.81(7.92)(2.33)^2 = 207 \text{ lbs.}$$

$$\text{net weight} = 2.5(150) - 207 = 375 - 207 = 168 \text{ lbs.}$$

"So!" Gerry concluded triumphantly. "We weigh only a few more pounds at the equator here than we do on Earth, despite the high gravity. The closer we move to the poles, the more we'll weigh. Of course, I have only a five-inch slide-rule, and the figures may be correct only to two significant figures, but you get the idea."

"I guess we get it, all right," Strike muttered, still a bit miffed that Gerry had kept it to herself when they had so desperately needed a ray of hope. "So long as we maintain contact with Triton's surface, we're safe. But the moment we lose contact—uh-uh!"

Intrigued by the thought, Barrows experimented with a little upward jump. He promptly came down with a teeth-rattling jolt. No one ventured to duplicate the demonstration. They were effectively held by unseen chains.

"Say!" Strike had another idea. "Dacres will be dropping in again in a few days to write our farewell message for us. If we can rig up a welcome, maybe there'll be a surprise ending yet to the draymah of 'Gerry and the Pirates'."

CHAPTER IV

A Hairy Intruder

Tensed up as they were, having undergone terrible physical stress under fear of impending death, the men needed that feeble joke as an excuse to let down. They roared with laughter, as if it had been brilliantly witty, or even the broadest slapstick gag. They repeated it with variations and comic embroidery till they were emotionally spent, completely relaxed.

Finally, someone made the obvious point that if they were to surprise Dacres on his return, then they must prepare to survive the intervening days.

Sobered, under Strike's leadership, they began to assess their situation.

Outside, the terrain of Triton was bleakly unrelieved in the dim light, seemingly of volcanic origin. There was an occasional tree, squat and massive and spiny. Hoar frost coated the hollows, and a gusty wind whistled thinly.

With quiet efficiency, the men went about their duties, thrusting delicate instruments through the special valves, testing temperature, pressure, analyzing the atmosphere. Strike took one look at the thermometer and shivered.

"I don't believe it," he declared.

"Oxygen out there, all right," Kranz, working with the air sample, announced with satisfaction. "Trace of hydrogen. Trace of water vapor." Then after an interval, "Oh-oh.

Chlorine, too. Not much, though. Be easy to adjust the filters on our pressure suits to take care of it.... Couple of inert gases, nothing harmful." He looked up.

Gerry and Strike traded glances.

"Good as could be expected," Strike said. "Naturally the gravity would hold a substantial atmospheric envelope. Shall we stroll about the yard and meet the neighbors?"

They drew lots for the six space-suits, and presently the winners poured out upon the surface of Triton like school children at recess. McCray and Kranz promptly staggered tipsily and fell down. Strike and the other men lurched and scrambled and finally remained upright in very weird positions, as if leaning against a gale. They all looked about in amazed bewilderment except Gerry, who was convulsed in unseemly merriment.

Strike inspected the landscape, which was apparently quite flat, then tried to understand why everyone acted as if standing on a hillside. He borrowed an apt phrase from McCray's vocabulary.

"I don't get it," he said.

"Another item I forgot to mention," Gerry explained. "One of Triton's more amusing properties. 'Down' is not perpendicular to the ground, except at the poles and the equator! Evidently, you didn't land quite at the equator, though you came close enough. The phenomenon isn't so noticeable in the lifeboat because it's already lying at an angle. Incidentally, a trip from the poles to the equator would be downhill all the way!"

"Aren't you the cute one, though," Strike growled.

He thought about this strange state of affairs, and had an awful vision of Triton slowly breaking up, with everything rolling down from its two poles till there was nothing left but an equator, spinning solemnly through the heavens like a runaway wheel.

To rid himself of this nightmare, he became very businesslike, dividing the castaways into groups for a general stock-taking. Exploration of the immediate vicinity was not encouraging. There was very little surface moisture, and drilling for water was of course out of the question. A kettle of melted frost, painfully gathered, proved potable, after boiling had driven off the chlorine.

The air was breathable through filter-masks, though cold as a knife-blade in the lungs. McCray, excited as a boy over the new experiences, tried spitting, and was delighted to find the result turned to icicles before reaching the ground. He abandoned his fun, however, when his lips froze together painfully.

Food, either animal or vegetable, there seemed to be none. This worried Strike.

"There's a lockerful of concentrates," he said, "but they won't last nine of us too long. We can only hope friend Dacres doesn't wait too long before returning to check on us."

His voice trailed off as he saw Gerry staring wide-eyed past him. He turned. Thirty yards away, something new had been added to the landscape—a five-foot high Thing covered completely with dark, coarse hair, tapering to a blunt point from a broad base. It somewhat resembled a blackly furry bishop, strayed from a gigantic chessboard. The Thing stood

utterly motionless in the grayness, as they watched. Though apparently without features, it somehow gave the feeling of watching them in intense curiosity.

"Pretend not to look at it," Gerry suggested finally.

At once, the weird-looking intruder glided swiftly forward to within twenty yards, then froze stiffly again in its watchful attitude. McCray's eyes were popping. He hadn't the background to take this experience in stride.

"What is it?" he croaked. "Vegetable or mineral? D'ja see how it sort o' glides along, sneakin' up on us? No feet! How does it work?"

"What a beautiful specimen!" Gerry sighed with professional longing. "I really think it wants to make friends. Doesn't it remind you of an oversize Scotty pup sitting up to beg?"

Strike snorted.

"What an imagination! Looks more to me like—"

"Watch it!" came the sudden warning.

In the discussion, they had taken their eyes from the newcomer, and it had seized the opportunity to move in. The center of its head opened to reveal an enormous mouth, filled with hideous, slavering, black fangs. Emitting an eerie whistling note, the Thing rushed savagely upon the group, in a horridly blind fury.

Everyone scattered like flushed quail, and the hairy enemy, unable to make quick turns, charged harmlessly through like a bull. Abandoning all pretense, it turned and came sliding back in another silent, deadly rush. Again, the castaways dodged aside.

"He has such an endearing way of showing his friendliness!" Strike gibed at his fiancée.

But though there were elements of humor in being chased round and round the space-boat, tiring muscles soon warned that the situation was no joke.

"This can't go on indefinitely," Gerry finally gasped. "Someone'll slip, or dodge a little too late. And if we retreat into the ship, it'll just mean a siege. If that blasted Dacres had only left us a weapon—"

She might have been a lady Aladdin, speaking the magic formula, for the lifeboat opened and Barrows, grinning uncertainly, tossed an improvised contraption to Strike. It consisted of two scalpels, fastened with wires from the control panel to a three-foot metal piece of weather-stripping ripped from the doorsill, to form a spear.

"Best we could do on short notice," Barrows apologized, then retreated precipitately, as the shaggy, faceless nemesis charged raveningly against the closing porte.

As the Thing reeled back from the shock, Strike deftly moved in with his crude weapon, slashing for the abdomen. The result was so completely devastating that Strike was dumbfounded.

The razor-sharp little knives went in as if through butter, and when they were withdrawn, a torrent of grayish fluid spouted

forth almost endlessly, as if the strange creature were filled with the stuff to the exclusion of any kind of organs.

Eventually, the rank flood ceased, and the enemy collapsed like an empty glove, dead. The victory was so absolute—the weird animal had been so utterly ferocious, animated solely by the two emotions of cunning and hate. It had been defeated so easily—that bewilderment took the place of triumph. Everyone gathered round Strike and his trophy.

"Funny stuff," Kranz said, pointing to the great puddle of vital fluid, as yet unaffected by the temperature. "Wonder what it is?"

"Must be anti-freeze," Gerry hazarded.

"Be interesting to examine the beast," Strike said slowly.

He and Kranz exchanged a long look and, by common consent, seized the shrunken carcass and bore it into the lifeboat. They could rig up a rough laboratory there, putter around for hours with the smelly corpse, and be quite happy.

Kranz was a fiend for chemical analysis. He would sample the Styx as Charon rowed him across. Gerry, whose interest in strange creatures was confined to live ones with commercial value, shrugged it off. It was one of the few times in her life she missed the point.

Seven times, Neptune's pale bulk popped over the horizon to make its swift journey across the sky before Strike, smiling like a cat in a bird-cage, invited Gerry into the lifeboat.

"Interesting beastie," he observed. "Skin as thin as paper, despite the shaggy coat. No circulatory system. Somehow that mess of fluid takes the place of blood—has corpuscles

and things in it, too. Rudimentary organs of some kind about where you'd expect to find eyes. In the absence of a Latin scholar, we've named it *Apod Shaggius*—footless and hairy. 'Shaggie' for short."

"That hardly accounts for the self-satisfied smile," Gerry said shrewdly.

Strike grinned wider.

"We analyzed the fluid," he said. "It's a chlorinated compound, as you might expect—basically perchlorethylene."

"And so?"

"Kranz thinks it would be easy to convert the stuff, right inside the creature's body, into hexachlorethane, without any immediate harm. Just a few injections."

"Now there's a brilliant experiment!" Gerry simmered exasperatedly. "And at a time like this, marooned at the outer extremities of the System, our days numbered! Why, for heaven's sake?"

She still did not see the point, nor did any of the others except Kranz, and Strike found perverse delight in that fact. Gerry had kept still about Triton's peculiar balance of centrifugal and gravitational forces while she wasn't sure.

He, too, would have his little mystery till he knew whether his experiment was going to pan out.

The fact was, within a few hours, or days, Dacres would be returning to see if his murder plot had worked, and to set the stage for the rescue parties. The castaways would have one chance—and one only—to fight for their lives. It had to be

good. And anything, however unlikely, that might give them an edge was well worth the effort.

"Never mind why," Strike urged. "Just be a good gal and help me out. All we need is one of these Shaggies captured alive to work on. You can do it. There's chloroform in the medical kit, and a rope that'd make a fine lasso. And, anyhow, surely one little old monster couldn't faze the inimitable Gerry Carlyle!"

Gerry choked back some very unladylike words.

CHAPTER V

Knockout

Came the day when Tommy Strike's stomach had butterflies in it. That was not from hunger, although rations hadn't been generous. It was the sensation that every fighter knows as the ring lights go on, and the house darkens, and he awaits the bell for the first round.

They were all awaiting the bell now, tense and drawn-faced, as they hid in the darkened lifeboat, ready for a bigger, more desperate fight than any their prizefight pal, Kid McCray, had ever engaged in. Days of anxious waiting were over. Miles above the tricky Neptunian satellite, hovered *The Ark*, slowly descending, quartering in geometric pattern, as the detectors sought the smaller craft.

Were they ready for battle? Strike wondered. Some crude knives and knuckle-dusters had been made, and there had

been some excitement when they captured one of the weird-looking hairy creatures they called Shaggies. Strike's enthusiasm for the experiment he and Kranz had performed on the beast had waned.

It was admittedly a longshot, though even if it didn't succeed, they would be no worse off than before. What it all boiled down to was an ambush. Dacres and his mob would be expecting to find nine corpses, the result of the murderous gravity. He was due for a shock.

It would be attacking proton-pistol-armed killers almost barehanded, but they had the advantage of stunning surprise. And the captured Shaggie just might help. It had been "doped up," as McCray expressed it, and turned loose when *The Ark* had finally come into sight. Now it stood out there, a blot on the landscape, surely one of Nature's mistakes.

Of course, the creature would inevitably attack any moving thing, including unwary pirates, with vigor. But whether subsequent events would conform with theory, was in the lap of the gods. And to them, Strike, in the intensity of his desire to rectify what he felt to be his fault, prayed fervently.

At length the time for wondering was over, for Dacres had finally located the wreck and was bringing *The Ark* down in a swift plunge, to hover lightly a few feet above the surface, balloon-like.

"They sure handle it sweet," someone muttered grudgingly.

"They ought to. They've had plenty of time to practise." That was Baumstark.

"S-sh! They might hear us!"

Minutes ticked away, as the gangsters in *The Ark* made their routine tests. Then the ship came to rest, the main porte slid open, and the entire vicious mob stood in the big lock staring eagerly out. All wore gravity clogs.

Strike recognized Dacres at once, taller than the others, and anger began to seethe in his brain like an acid bath, ran like liquor through his veins. He felt his companions stir in the grip of that emotion, as they peered through pin-point peepholes. He could literally smell the hate as it sweated out of their trembling bodies.

"Not yet. Not yet," Strike whispered restrainingly. "Watch."

It was an ancient movie—jerky action, but no accompanying sound. Outside, the Shaggie was going through its familiar routine, sliding closer and closer, as it believed itself unobserved, to the men in the lock entrance, amazingly like an enormous friendly puppy, afraid of a kick, but hoping for a bone.

One of the gangsters, completely taken in, snapped his fingers at the creature invitingly. Then, inevitably following its fixed emotion-habit pattern, the Shaggie plunged viciously into action. Its initial rush carried it right into the air-lock.

A fearful tangle ensued.

Mouths popped open in soundless cries. Faces grimaced in sudden terror. Dodging madly about, the men fought to retreat into the main corridor of *The Ark*.

The Shaggie's second blind, slaving rush took it right along with them, and someone went down. There was a nasty moment before a proton bolt blasted the Shaggie quite literally to bits, flooding the passageway with its evil-smelling, vital fluid.

"This is it!"

Strike's voice was suddenly sharp and triumphant. A spate of grimly vengeful men, with Kid McCray in the lead, poured from the lifeboat and ran toward *The Ark*. Finely trained fighting men that they were, they didn't even pause at the astounding sight that met their eyes. From out of The Ark's open porte came billow after billow of dense white smoke. It was as if the entire ship's interior had suddenly begun to burn.

As the crew dashed across the short intervening space—they had left off their pressure suits for sake of freedom of action—Strike breathlessly explained in triumph:

"The smoke's harmless! Don't be afraid! Hexachlorethane in the Shaggie reacts vigorously with metallic zinc in the zincal floor and forms zinc chloride. Reaction liberates such great heat that the zinc chloride is immediately evaporated, and a dense cloud o' white smoke is generated!"

As Strike fought for breath, he saw the man called Monk stagger out of the blinding smoke into view, squarely in the path of the charging McCray. Without even slowing, McCray let drive with a frightful blow, a concentrate of days of fear and hunger and hate.

The blow caught the man squarely in the pit of the stomach, and through a momentary thinning of the smoke, the

astonished castaways saw Monk go sailing clear through the air-lock and across the corridor to smash sickeningly against the far wall.

The truth dawned instantly. The piratical gang had adjusted their clogs to handle two-and-a-half Gs. Consequently, they were only flyweights now, not having had time to discover the facts of the gravitational situation.

With a howl of pure joy, Strike plowed after McCray into the wild melee that surged savagely through the white murk, throwing haymakers at everything in reach. If he hit someone who was solid, he muttered apologies and sought a new target. If his victim vanished from sight in the smoke from a single punch, he eagerly followed it up.

The end of the battle was a foregone conclusion. Completely surprised and disorganized, Dacres and his gang were overwhelmed. Only half realizing they were being attacked by men supposedly flat, frozen corpses, and not daring to use their guns for fear of hitting their own comrades, they were scattered, beaten senseless, and disarmed in three incredible minutes of fighting against phantoms.

Only two escaped that first onslaught. They fled down *The Ark's* endless corridors, firing around corners in a deadly, sniping rear-guard action at their relentless pursuers. Strike, with the aid of captured weapons, quickly laid out a foolproof campaign against the two remaining pirates.

The pirates were driven to the ship's stern by constant threat of being outflanked, as the crew of *The Ark* infiltrated through dark side passages and storerooms. Then, with the arsenal room in his hands, Strike ordered anesthetic bombs

broken in the ship's ventilating system. Everyone donned masks. Presently, the two diehards were captured as they slept soundly, faces flushed, in the galley.

The battle was over. Gerry, who had stood apart from actual combat by Strike's insistence, rewarded the valiant victors with a kiss for each.

Tommy Strike, during his tumultuous career with his world-famous fiancée, had known some wild celebrations. But he had never witnessed anything like the welcome that awaited them this time.

At a brief stopover on Mars for fresh food, Gerry had broken the whole fantastic story, which had promptly been forwarded by ether-beam to Earth in complete detail—the treacherous attempt of pirates to seize *The Ark* and murder its crew, the marooning, the outwitting of certain death, the strange fight, and finally the return of Gerry Carlyle, bringing the criminals back alive.

For the last leg of Mars-Earth run, they had an escort of police craft, and in mid-space, an armed guard was put aboard. Privately, the crew considered this very unnecessary, but Gerry permitted it only as part of a hard bargain she characteristically drove—an understanding that before Dacres was indicted, she would have first crack at his bank account to pay for the trip to Triton, exactly as contracted for.

And now the home spaceport was in truth a sea of humanity, frothing with white, as thousands of faces turned upward to

watch the descent. There were cheers, and speeches, and officials, and photographers, and tele-newscasters.

Autograph-hunters broke through the police lines time and again. There was a nasty few minutes as Dacres and his band were hustled through the crowd to the police 'copters. And during it all, Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike remained smiling, gracious and friendly. Such marked adulation would have embarrassed any but the most poised.

Finally as the celebrants began to drift away, one of the reporters spotted McCray standing patiently in *The Ark's* air-lock. Instantly, climax piled upon climax, as the man shouted:

"Hey, look! It's Kid McCray! It's the missing Martian middleweight champ!"

Back came the crowds, the cameramen, the broadcasters. The crew of *The Ark* turned to McCray with jaws ludicrously agape. "You mean you really *are* a boxing champion?" Gerry cried.

McCray grinned self-consciously.

"I tried to tell ya. Nobody wouldn't believe me, that's all."

"Well, I'll be—!" Gerry swore a ladylike oath, to the broadcasters' confusion, and the delight of everyone else.

Then a hundred questions showered on the little group, and bit by bit the amazing story behind McCray's presence on *The Ark* came out.

Darkness was approaching when the spectators, surfeited with the excitement and surprises of the afternoon, at last gave the weary wanderers rest.

Comparatively alone at last, *The Ark's* crew grinned feebly at one another. Tommy Strike had been very thoughtful since McCray's identity was established. Now he tried to move unobtrusively away. Too late. The erstwhile, pushed-around menial placed a firm hand on the captain's arm.

"Uh, look, Mr. Strike. There's sump'in I just gotta do. I only dropped the duke a few times in my life, an' every time I come back to reverse the decision. Even with Dacres an' Monk, I squared things. So you're the only fellow in the world to stop me—remember that first day in the pilot room?—who I ain't got even with. Doncha see? I'm the champ. I just *have* to reverse that decision." His eyes pleaded for understanding.

Strike nodded resignedly.

"Matter of principle, I suppose?"

"Sure." McCray nodded eagerly. "It won't take long. Just one knockdown, strictly friendly. You won't hardly feel it, Mr. Strike."

"Okay." Strike's fists came up, and they squared off.

McCray bobbed and weaved, bored in after the retreating Strike—and suddenly the pugilist's feet slid into a weird tangle and he sat down hard. He leaned forward to clutch his ankle and howled in anguish.

Strike, who hadn't landed a blow, and the amazed spectators gathered around. McCray's ankle was visibly swelling—a bad sprain. The bout was over. "What on earth happened?" Strike inquired.

McCray gave up groaning a moment, pointed to the moist, bruised peel of a Martian banana, then looked around accusingly for a culprit to blame. His glance stopped on Gerry Carlyle, whose cheeks were bulging as she chewed heroically. She gulped it down.

Breathless, she raised her fiancé's arm.

"The winnah," she cried, "and still champeen—Tommy Strike!"

Hand in hand, they ran laughing away into the darkness, while Kid McCray beat the tarmac in futile exasperation.

"Aw, wait a minute," he wailed. "You just can't do this to me!"

[1] ω is the omega symbol.

[The end of *Siren Satellite* by Arthur K. Barnes]