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ON STREETS OF GOLD

BY IRVING E. COX, JR.

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

If man finds native, intelligent life on the planets, he's going to find it hard not to exploit them. And it will be harder to give up thinking in terms of past experience. Too hard. . . .

The buzzer clattered. Curt snapped down the intercom lever.

"Take-off in ten minutes, Commander Hallen. Is Commander Clark going down with us, sir?"

"Yes; there's nothing more we can do about it, Lieutenant Hughes."

"The men are saying, if Clark won't stay in the satellite—"

"Tell them their superstitions are showing." Curt snapped off the connection angrily. What did they think he could do? He had no other authority over Mike Clark, if persuasion wouldn't keep the man in line.

Curt pulled himself to the wall locker and took out his flight uniform, stripping off his loose-fitting fatigues. For a moment he hung in the air, weightless and naked. He was a young man, more than six feet tall, broad-shouldered and lean in the hips. Lithe muscle rippled beneath his copper skin.

His blood raced with excitement. Take-off in ten minutes! This was it—the last frontier, the last chance to colonize the planets.

Three years ago the Martian expedition had failed. Curt would never forget the bitter

story Commander Clark had told to the Board of Inquiry.

"Yes, I contracted the fever," he had answered, "but I had a light case."

"Still, you survived," the presiding Senator had repeated. "It seems curious, Commander, that none of the other men—"

"My expedition panicked. They all tried to crowd aboard the shuttle. I had no way of knowing which of them was infected; and it was an epidemic virus, remember. If I'd brought that back to Earth, millions would have died."

"So you abandoned your men."

"I had to make certain that no other Earth-expedition was ever sent to Mars."

After Clark's testimony even the most sympathetic Congressmen were unwilling to vote new appropriations for Solar exploration. Yet it was not in the nature of Americans to be content to stagnate. Having crossed the barrier into outer space, they were goaded by their psychological heritage to explore it. Congress reluctantly supplied a dribble of funds for an expedition to Venus.

As commander of the expedition, Curt Hallen supervised the building of the artificial satellite which had been established in a Venusian orbit. He drove the work crew with demoniac fury,

for he believed fanatically in the feasibility of planetary colonization. In his mind Curt could hear the whispering voices of history, the ghosts of Columbus and Pizarro, of Lewis and Clark—all the great names that symbolized the conquest of the American West. The expedition to Venus was a part of the same tradition.

So Curt believed. But, at the same time, he was aware of a quiet irony: he was a full-blooded Comanche. To his people, the conquest of the West had meant disaster and degradation. Now he—a child of the dispossessed—blazed the conqueror's trail to Venus.

The intercom buzzed again. Ignoring it, Curt drew on his bulky, pressurized suit and left the satellite. He entered the shuttle-rocket. Air hissed into the lock. Curt racked his suit and pulled himself up the companion-tube into the lead-walled control chamber, where the thirty members of the expedition were already strapped into foam-cushioned shuttle chairs.

Curt signaled. The motor roared briefly. The rocket moved down into the Venusian mists.

Strapped beside Curt were Lieutenant Hughes, Curt's second-in-command, and Mike Clark. Clark was a member of the Venusian expedition by virtue of a Congressional appoint-



ment as special observer. He was an aloof and silent man, who had never become an integrated part of Curt's crew. Whenever Clark talked to the others, he seemed to convey a feeling of impending failure, without putting it into words.

"Of course we'll find no epidemic virus on Venus," he had said again and again. "Such a coincidence is impossible!"

Anyone listening to him somehow gained the impression that he expected precisely that—perhaps, even looked forward to it.

Yet it was not Clark's pessimism that made him an outcast. The truth was far simpler: Mike Clark was a commander who had abandoned his men to save himself. No matter what excuse he made, the service could not forgive him. They labeled Clark a coward.

Twenty minutes after the rocket slid into the Venusian wreath of clouds, Curt felt the first tug of planetary gravity. At the same time, Lieutenant Hughes brought into focus on the radar screen the first comprehensible ground pattern. The lieutenant jacked up the angle of her chair so she could read the screen more clearly.

Under any conditions, she would have been a striking woman. The skin-tight, silver-

colored nylon flight uniform made her charms emphatic. Tall and statuesque, she was transformed into a goddess by the sheen of the uniform. Her yellow hair was cut very short. It curled in a golden crown above her face, which was unashamedly flecked with freckles.

Alice Hughes she was; a Kansas ranch girl—with a graduate degree in physics. She was one of seven women Curt had chosen for the expedition.

Curt studied the radar screen thoughtfully. The Venusian land mass was a scattered body of islands. For a landing site he chose a small, green island nestled close to the equator. At twelve thousand feet the rocket plunged through the cloud sphere that shrouded the planet. Through the periscope Curt saw the curve of Venus clearly. The land was covered with green foliage, and very flat; Curt saw no ranges of mountains, although here and there the ground ruffed up into low hills.

The first view of Venus was necessarily brief. Curt could not use rocket fuel to explore the land; that would be done later by means of the helicopter crowded in the hold.

The rocket glided into a landing on the equatorial island Curt had selected. While the chemists went into the airlock to analyze

the composition of the air, Curt rolled out the periscope and turned it in a full circle. He saw a black soil and tree-like growths with enormous leaves, towering a hundred feet above the rocket. It was near the close of the Venusian day and the gray twilight was descending; bleak shadows crept over the forest floor.

Suddenly Mike Clark caught Curt's arm, steadying the periscope. "Did you see that, Hallen?"

"Yes. A kind of gleam among the trees."

"Like a wall of water," Lieutenant Hughes suggested. "Ice, you think?"

"No; Venus is too hot."

"A wall," Commander Clark whispered. "But walls have to be built. Built by people!"

The chemists came trooping out of the airlock.

"It's good air, Commander Hallen!"

"A much higher oxygen content than ours; no other difference."

The whole expedition burst into excited talk and moved toward the port. Curt silenced them quickly. "Is there any evidence of a planetary virus?" he demanded. "Anything resembling Martian conditions?"

"We can't test for that, sir."

Curt turned to Mike Clark. "All right, Clark. You're the special observer; what do you think?"

"A wall; civilization! Hallen, we can't land!"

"Snap out of it. If there are people here, we can handle them. You said the Martian virus was fed by the flora. Does it look as if the same cycle exists here?"

With an effort, Clark shook off his daze. "I don't know. The plants aren't the same."

"Would you risk a landing?"

Commander Clark licked his thin lips and stared silently at the semicircle of faces. "Hallen, there may be people here, men with customs and Gods of their own and—" He broke off with a shrug. "Why ask my opinion? Go ahead; give the orders. Make your landing. There's no virus, Hallen." He spoke with an agonized bitterness, but for the first time he seemed to be sincere.

Curt opened the port. Clean, fresh air filled the cabin. It was damp and warm, fragrant with the odor of wet earth. One by one the members of the expedition followed Curt down the metal landing ladder. A warm mist was falling stealthily. The plants folded above the rocket caught the water on their huge leaves, occasionally spilling large, gleaming drops upon the

soil. The trunks of the plants arose like cathedral columns encircling the meadow where the rocket had landed. Curt heard no sound except the drip of the mist and the muffled clatter of metal upon metal, as two men began to build a fire in the shelter of the ship.

Alice Hughes moved quietly to his side. "It's strange," she whispered in awe. "The way the trees are growing, Curt."

It was the first time she had dropped military formality since they had left the Earth-satellite. The probing fingers of Curt's old, boyhood anguish twisted his soul; he wanted to turn away from her, and he could not.

"Strange? How, Lieutenant?"

"The trees make a pattern, a perfect circle around the meadow. They wouldn't—simply grow that way."

"Not on the Earth, no; this is Venus. We've no idea how these plants evolved."

"It reminds me of a park. And Commander Clark said there were people—"

The fire blazed up with sudden brilliance, spreading a yellow glow over the clearing. Lieutenant Hughes gasped and drew back against Curt. Just beyond the limit of the light Curt saw a circle of eyes gleaming in the darkness. He put his arm around

her shoulder and drew her back toward the rocket.

The fire leaped higher. Vague shapes took form beneath the glittering eyes. Cold terror stabbed at Curt's soul, for the rocket was surrounded by a circle of silent, watching animals. They bore a faint resemblance to kangaroos, but their bodies were thickly scaled and their heads were flat-faced and round. They stood erect on two rabbit-like feet, and they had the additional support of short, thick, scaled tails. Their forefeet were long, thin and jointed, tapering into six-digitated paws.

Apparently aware that they had been seen, the Venusian reptiles moved closer, while a sing-song sound came from their throats. Their mouths hung open. Curt saw gleaming rows of sharp, white teeth.

The others moved backward to the landing ladder and began to pull themselves up into the safety of the cabin. But Curt knew they could not all escape. In the first hour, his expedition faced disaster! On Mars it had been a planetary virus; here, primitive reptiles. Commander Clark would have a second failure to report to Congress, and man's exploration of space would be over.

From the open port, a junior officer shouted down at the advancing animals. He swung a

Tommy-gun in his arm, spattering the damp ground with lead. The animals stopped and their sing-song howling ceased. But three of the monsters—leaders of the pack; or, perhaps, simply hungrier than the rest—continued to slither toward Curt.

Another burst of gunfire. The three reptiles lay dead. Curt expected the pack to leap upon him in fury; but nothing happened. The Venusian animals dragged away their dead and fled, silently, into the dripping forest.

Once inside the rocket, the members of the expedition seemed remarkably unperturbed.

"We should have anticipated animal life," one of the men said.

"In any case," another added, "we won't have any trouble after this."

"No; they're afraid of our guns."

The following morning systematic exploration of Venus began. The members of the expedition went everywhere in pairs and each of them was armed. The gentle mist was no longer falling, but the gray clouds never lifted and, throughout the day, rain fell at intervals. The temperature varied very little from a Fahrenheit of seventy-five degrees. On the first day the periphery of the exploration did

not move far beyond the meadow where the rocket had landed. Detailed analyses were made of the soil and water, with favorable results.

"We could grow anything in this ground," a biochemist told Curt.

"Is there enough sunlight?"

"Apparently." The scientist gestured toward the towering plants. "Those things—they seem to be a species of ivy, by the way—they thrive here. The clouds never lift, Hallen, but Venus is closer to the sun than the Earth is."

The water was amazingly pure, and tasteless. It had only a microscopic mineral content, with no trace of iron.

On the second day the helicopter was wheeled out of the ship and fueled. An aerial photographer flew north from the landing meadow. In less than half an hour he returned, chattering with excitement.

"It looked like a town, I'll swear it!" he reported to Curt. "I couldn't get any closer because of the trees."

"Your eyes played you tricks," Curt answered. "Let's print your picture and see what you've got."

But when Curt and Alice Hughes studied the wet glossy films they felt a puzzled misgiving. Unmistakably square-cut structures of some sort were

visible beneath the giant ivy leaves.

"How far was it?" Curt asked the photographer.

"Half a mile. Want me to try for a clearer picture, sir?"

"No. Cruise south and see if you can pick up anything else."

When the pilot had left, Curt looked at the photograph again. "This'll have to be investigated on foot, Alice."

"I'll go with you, Curt."

"There may be danger—"

"From the overgrown lizards?" Lieutenant Hughes laughed and touched the gun strapped to her hips. "They've learned their lesson. They'll keep clear of us."

Curt strapped a portable radio transmitter to his shoulders, so that he could make emergency contact with the rocket. He carried a Tommy-gun as well as extra rounds of ammunition.

They still wore their silver-colored, nylon flight uniforms, because it was a durable material, as tough as leather. In the deep shadows of the ivy forest the air was hot and sticky. Curt pulled his zipper and stripped back his blouse, letting it hang loose from his waist.

"A man can make himself comfortable," Lieutenant Hughes said. "But a woman, of course—" She laughed for a moment; then

her face turned serious. "Do you smell the earth, Curt? It's like a farm at home, after the spring plowing."

"Venus could make a good world, Alice."

"Will you be a colonist?"

"Maybe."

"We could be free, Curt; live our own lives; make the sort of—"

"We, Alice?"

"Now we aren't going through that again, Curt Hallen! I intend to marry you; the matter's settled."

"I'm an Indian."

"Oh, when will you grow up? We talked that out ten years ago, when you were a sophomore in college!"

"Age doesn't change the facts; I'm still an Indian."

"Grown men forget their childhood frustrations." She looked up into his eyes. "If you don't want me, Curt, why did you ask me to join your expedition?"

"Because—because you're a physicist, Alice."

"But not the best; not even a very good one. You're still trying to show off, Curt, like a little boy. All right, I'm impressed. Now let's get down to something important: when are you going to ask me to marry you?"

She reached for his arm as he swung ahead of her; but she stumbled over a root. She fell

into the trees but, instead of falling, she struck a transparent wall.

"Curt!"

He turned back and examined the surface of the wall. It did not have the slick, cold feeling nor the betraying surface reflection of glass.

Suddenly Alice screamed. A forest animal lurched at them through the undergrowth behind the wall. It was like an enormously enlarged beetle, with a tortoise armor. The beetle struck the wall and its teeth chattered against it. It eyed them with stalk eyes, and then darted to the left, only to meet another invisible barrier.

"The thing's caged in!" Lieutenant Hughes sighed her relief. But she added, in an awed whisper, "Curt, a wall has to be *built!*"

"We can't call it a cage. We can't apply our own experiences here. Who built it? Why? Where is he now?" Curt ran his hand over the wall again. "For all we know, this could be sap that's dripped from the ivy leaves. Maybe it formed by chance; maybe the plants are carnivorous. We can't name any process, assume any hypothesis, until we've assembled data and classified it."

"Maybe, Curt, it's the scale of

things that confuses us. Look around you! Ivy-plants a hundred feet high, armored beetles as large as elephants, lizards like kangaroos. On a scale of that sort, a man would be—"

"I read my last fairy tale twenty years ago."

He laughed cheerfully and locked his arm in hers. Two hundred feet beyond the trapped beetle, the path turned sharply and they came upon the structures which had been photographed from the helicopter.

A double row of yellow-walled buildings stood on both sides of a smooth, yellow road. But the place was empty and deserted. The gentle Venusian rain began to fall again as they entered the village. The street turned slick. Curt slipped and fell. He sat in a puddle of warm water fingering the surface of the road. Then he got up and walked to one of the buildings to examine the yellow bricks.

"Give me your guess," he asked. "What do you think these places are made of?"

She brushed her hand over the soft metal and her eyes widened. "Gold?"

With his knife Curt picked one of the corner bricks free. He beat the metal with the butt of his revolver. He was able to reshape the brick easily, without effort. He drew his fingernail

across the surface, and the mark left a clear gully in the face of the brick.

"If it's gold," he said, "it's nearly pure."

"Curt, the chemists say the oxygen content of the Venusian air is much higher than ours. As a matter of fact, our rocket is already beginning to rust. But there's no rust in this village."

"True; oxygen won't corrode gold."

"It's fantastic, Curt! Why would anyone build a village of a precious metal? It must have taken all the gold they've ever mined on Venus!"

"We're still thinking from our own point of view, Alice. There's no physical law saying that gold has to be rare."

"Even so, it's a ridiculous metal to build with. It's so soft, Curt!"

"Perhaps they have nothing else. There's no iron in the water." He clenched his fists. "But all that is pointless speculation. The important question is this: who built the village? If there are rational men on Venus, why haven't they taken some notice of our landing?"

He heard a faint shuffling at the end of the golden street and looked up quickly. A band of the scaled lizards was moving toward them. He darted a glance

in the opposite direction; the other exit to the village was cut off as well.

Curt unslung his gun and sent a burst of lead blazing over the heads of the animals. Both groups stopped. Curt heard the soft mutter of their sing-song chatter. Furiously he turned the dials on his portable transmitter and called to the rocket for help. He thought he raised a response, but he could not be sure, for both groups of reptiles closed in at once. Curt fired point-blank into the pack, but he killed only one or two. His armament was no match for their overwhelming numbers. He heard Alice Hughes scream in terror as they tore her away from him.

A heavy blow struck the side of Curt's head. He had a vague recollection, later, of lying on the golden street while their clammy paws clawed over his naked chest, toying with the unzipped flaps of his nylon uniform. He tried to fight back, but they threw him roughly against the metal street.

When he regained consciousness, he was lying in a shuttle chair in the rocket, a padded bandage taped to his head. He sat up slowly, his head pounding with pain. Mike Clark smiled at him.

"It was just like a kid's movie," Clark commented. "We

arrived in the nick of time—with guns blazing—just as the lizards were carrying you off. We must've slaughtered a dozen of them before they dropped you and scurried for cover."

"Where's Alice?"

"My, Venus has made us informal!"

"Is she all right, Clark?"

Commander Clark spread his hands hopelessly. "Unfortunately, the lizards got away with her."

Curt tried to stand, but his head swam with pain. "Search for her! They can't--"

"Oh, we did, Hallen; we did. Those lizards can run when they've a mind to." Clark's cynical tone turned cold. "Had enough, boy? Why don't you call it off and go home? We've lost Lieutenant Hughes today; tomorrow it'll be one of the others. We don't belong on Venus, Hallen; we're Earth people. Mars was a mistake. Venus is—"

The pilot of the helicopter swung up through the open port, saluting briskly. "Commander Hallen, I've been out scouring the forest for signs of Lieutenant Hughes and—"

"Any luck?"

"No, sir, but I've located a colony of men about ten miles south of here. They've a funny kind of glass wall around their

villages, but they're men, Commander! People like ourselves!"

"Another expedition?" Commander Clark demanded.

"It's possible, I suppose," Curt said. "We'll have to find out."

"But it's too late to do anything today, sir."

"Tomorrow's time enough; the villagers will still be here."

Beginning at dawn the next morning, the helicopter made seven flights shuttling men and arms to the broad, gravel plain outside the transparent walls of the Venusian villages. Ten men were left in the rocket, to continue the search for Alice Hughes.

Curt and Mike Clark went in the first flight. From the concealment of an ivy-tree at the crest of a low hill, they studied the colony. The villagers seemed to be primitives. They were tall, white-skinned, fair-haired, naked except for bright-colored paint streaking their bodies. They lived in huts built of leaves and branches; and they used rudimentary utensils made of gold.

The transparent wall enclosed an area of several square miles. In front of the wall was a water-filled moat, fifty feet wide, and teeming with a variety of reptilian life. Not one village but many lay behind the wall. While Curt and Clark watched, two

groups from different villages fought a bloody skirmish over a feeding ground. Their weapons were arrows and stone-tipped spears.

When the expedition was assembled, they moved up cautiously to the edge of the moat.

"So these are the Venusians," Commander Clark said dully. "The planet is ours, Hallen. We'll have no trouble eliminating this handful of savages."

"It isn't a matter of elimination. Our colonists will live on Venus with the natives; we'll teach them our technology."

"You speak, of course, from experience." Clark's words had the savage lash of a whip. "I'm sure some of the early American Colonials had a similarly noble view of our relations with the Indians—until the Colonials were strong enough to steal the Indian lands and destroy the Indian people."

Curt looked up at the transparent wall. "You're wrong, Clark," he said. "This isn't a primitive tribe, but a decadent remnant of a superior culture. These are the people who built the golden village; they invented the plastic walls, so they must have known something of science. Then a disaster occurred. My guess is they were overwhelmed by the lizards. The

people built this refuge and fled to it. They filled the moat with sea monsters which could turn back any lizard attack, and they threw up the walls for additional protection. But, once they were safe, they were too worn out by the struggle to maintain their culture."

"It adds up to the same thing, Hallen. If we come to Venus with Earth colonies, we'll destroy the Venusians."

"These people need help. They can't survive without it."

Curt ordered a bridge thrown across the moat. Four men cut one of the ivy-trees on the edge of the clearing, splitting it down its ten foot diameter and binding the two pieces together. The work was not hard, for beneath a thin, outer crust, the wood was as soft as sponge. Sap gushed from the tree like water and slowly hardened into a plastic material like the wall. The tree made a sturdy, substantial bridge, light enough for two men to lift.

Curt was annoyed when he examined the saws after the tree had been cut. The surfaces of the blades, which had been washed by the tree sap, were thickly covered with rust; the teeth shattered into a red powder when he brushed them with his hand. Completely useless.

As soon as the bridge was lowered over the moat, Venusian lizards swarmed out of the ivy forest and attacked the expedition. They obviously understood the use of a bridge and intended to take advantage of it to reach their prey behind the wall. Curt discovered that the lizards were armed—after a fashion—with long, black snakes twisted around their forepaws. He assumed that the snakes were a reptilian parasite, comparable to the fleas and ticks which inhabited Earth animals.

The fighting was finished quickly. The lizards suffered a score of casualties before they retreated. Only one of Curt's men died, when a lizard flung a writhing snake at the man's feet. The man sprang erect with a scream, and his dying fingers closed, paralyzed, upon the trigger of his gun. The bullets splattered an aimless arc in the air. When the lead struck the transparent wall, the material shattered and a twenty foot section beyond the bridge collapsed.

After the dust of battle had settled, timid groups of Venusians ventured out of their fortress and crossed the bridge. They moved cautiously toward the lizard bodies. When they were certain that the animals were dead, the Venusians fell

upon them savagely, hacking them into bloody chunks and flinging the pieces to the reptiles in the moat.

Curt's expedition set up headquarters in a nylon tent just inside the broken wall. Throughout the day they attempted to establish linguistic communication with the natives, but without success. Three times during the day Curt communicated by radio with the men he had left in the rocket. By means of the helicopter they were slowly extending their search for Alice Hughes, but they had no favorable information to report.

At nightfall Curt's men built a campfire in the rain, and doled out rations. Venusians gathered around, watching them eat. Each time a can was emptied, the Venusians snatched it up eagerly, sometimes quarreling among themselves for its possession. Before the meal was over, one of the Venusians brought Curt a handful of his own utensils, pots and bowls crudely made from beaten gold. By gesture he indicated that he wanted to make a trade.

"Gold for tin," Commander Clark whispered acidly. "Snap it up, Hallen."

"They've gold in abundance," Curt replied. "They're curious about our non-yellow metals."

"Of course, Hallen; start the exploitation early!"

The trading continued for hours. The Venusians happily emptied their huts of all their possessions and carried away tin cans in exchange. When the tins were exhausted, the Venusians expressed a desire for guns, but Curt turned thumbs down.

"Don't make the old mistakes again," Commander Clark whispered. "Here, the conquest will be different. We made one error when we traded with the Indians: we sometimes gave them arms. That made it dangerous later on when our settlers set out to steal the Indian land."

"Clark, the single track of your mind is getting just a little monotonous."

"I'd forgotten, Hallen; you're an Indian and you know all about exploitation."

"You're missing the point. The past history of the Earth has no meaning to Venus."

"Granted—until the two cultures meet, as they have now. We think and act in terms of our own experience. We carry it with us, like a plague."

Curt reached into his nylon and took out a cigarette, lighting it thoughtfully. "You didn't take a plague to Mars, Clark," he said. "But you found one there."

"Yes, an epidemic virus." Clark eyed him steadily.

"Nothing else?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"You know, Clark, a new expedition to Mars might be possible, even now. A man in a pressurized suit—"

Curt was interrupted by a tall, growling Venusian, who crowded close to observe his cigarette. He indicated that he wanted to try it. With a smile, Curt handed it over. The Venusian puffed and coughed. His face flushed scarlet and he flung the cigarette away. He staggered against the trunk of an ivy-tree and clung to it. When his spasm of nausea had passed, he crept to the spot where the cigarette lay, glowing red in the darkness. He picked up the butt and fled back to his native village.

Shortly after dawn the following morning, Curt was awakened by the sound of conflict. A bloody battle between two bands of Venusians swirled around the headquarters tent. Curt discovered why the natives had wanted tin cans. Over night they had beaten the metal into viciously effective spear and arrow heads; the Venusians were using their new weapons now before the metal rusted away.

After victory, the tribe came to trade again, bringing the spoils taken from the vanquished. But, instead of tin, they de-

manded cigarettes. Curt felt inexplicable misgiving, but he saw no sound reason to prohibit the trade. Eagerly the natives tugged their enormous piles of gold artifacts to the tent and carried away the fragile paper cylinders.

Thirty minutes later the tribe was gutted with insensibility. Men, women and children lay unconscious outside their huts, in the rain, spattered with their own filth. Others writhed in an orgiastic dance, grotesquely burlesquing their own ritual. They fought drunkenly among themselves, with cigarettes dangling from their lips. Some tottered from the bridge and were caught by the slimy monsters in the moat.

Throughout the day bands of natives staggered arm in arm across the wooden bridge to the clearing. They pranced, with mincing steps, toward the ivy-trees where the lizards lurked. The lizards sprang at them with their black, parasite snakes. Curt's men could not protect every Venusian party that ventured out beyond the walls. For hours the fringe of the clearing vibrated with their terrified screams as they died.

But by nightfall the orgy was over. The surviving Venusians were all inside the walls; more than a hundred were dead. The

native villages were quiet, paralyzed with the exhaustion of a community hangover.

Wearily Curt's expedition built a fire and broke out their rations. While they were eating, the helicopter soared out of the darkness and settled on the clear area between the tent and the wall. The pilot shouted good-natured greetings to his companions, and then drew Curt aside. Silently he flashed a pocket light over the helicopter. Every piece of metal was red with rust.

"The truth is, Commander Hallen, the helicopter's falling apart. And the rocket isn't much better, sir. If we stay on Venus another week, we'll never get off the ground."

Curt fingered his lower lip thoughtfully. "We can't pull out until we find Lieutenant Hughes, or at least make sure—" He brought himself up short. His mind refused to frame the alternative. He glanced toward the others lounging around the campfire. Curt had no right to endanger them on the slim chance that he might save Lieutenant Hughes.

Then his eyes strayed to the pile of Venusian artifacts accumulated in a corner of the tent. And the grimness eased out of his face; he had his solution. "All right," he said to the pilot.

"Stay the night here; in the morning you can shuttle us back to the rocket."

"We're leaving Venus, sir?"

"Temporarily. We'll load the gold aboard the rocket and return to the satellite. Then we'll clean off the rust and gold-plate every square inch of exposed metal in the ship."

"Of course, sir! Gold won't rust. Any ship that comes to Venus after this—" The pilot threw back his head and laughed. "Can't you hear Congress howl when we tell them the colonists will have to have gold-plated shuttle rockets?"

The pilot went to make his billet in the tent. Curt stood alone by the helicopter, fingering the rust that had corroded the metal.

"You'll forgive my eavesdropping, Hallen?"

Curt whirled. Mike Clark stood in the darkness beyond the ship. In the falling mist his face glowed glossily pink from the light of his cigarette. He joined Curt, looking up at the helicopter speculatively.

"So our metals won't hold up in the Venusian atmosphere! That about finishes the prospect of a colony, doesn't it?"

"No."

"But our weapons would be useless. After a few weeks, the

colonists would be at the mercy of the natives."

"You assume that conflict is inevitable, Clark; I don't."

"Perhaps not conflict; just exploitation. I've been down to the village, Hallen. It's quite a sight; you shouldn't miss it. They're recovering—most of them. But the tribe enjoyed its debauchery. They'll be back for more."

"I had no way of knowing what their nicotine reaction—"

"I don't suppose the white traders knew what would follow after they gave the first liquor to the Indians."

"I've issued orders, Clark; there'll be no more cigarettes for the Venusians, on any terms."

"Face the future honestly, Hallen! Think of the good-hearted souls—the upright people—who'll send out teachers to destroy Venusian customs, because by our standards they seem evil and barbaric. Think of the prim ladies who'll come to dress the Venusians in sacks, and teach them the disease of shame. It won't be pretty. It's the murder of a people, Hallen, and the responsibility is yours." Clark gripped Curt's arm with trembling fingers, "Hallen, the whites destroyed your people—your culture, your gods, your legends—on the misguided assumption that we were bringing you civilization. Take vengeance for that

now; or balance the account. Call it what you like! But don't let us repeat the same tragedy here."

"I have only one responsibility, Clark." Curt jerked his arm free. "I was commissioned to explore Venus for colonization."

"We've no right to grab the planets!"

"We had the brains to invent the machines, Clark; the machines give us the right."

"Solar exploration is a fluke of scientific research, Hallen. A by-product of war—that's the true measure of our civilization. Leave the Venusians to evolve their own culture in their own good time!"

"Mike, it's always easy to point out the shortcomings of our society." For the first time Curt used the Commander's given name, and he spoke very gently. "Disaster always makes more noise than success. Granted, we've made mistakes; but we've built a workable society, too. History is not necessarily a repetition of the crimes of the past. We've learned how to learn from the past. It'll be different when we build our colonies on Venus."

"That means you'll do nothing—"

"Nothing, Mike. We'll colonize Venus—our kind of men—and we'll make it our kind of world,

for both ourselves and the Venusians."

A woman cried Curt's name from the tent, the knife-edge of fear in her voice. He and Clark ran back to the dying fire, to confront a circle of sullen Venusians, their arms loaded with gold trade goods. The natives wanted nothing but cigarettes. When these were not at once forthcoming, the Venusians turned belligerent.

Curt tried to interest them in a miscellany of things—parts of nylon uniforms, spare zippers, toothbrushes, even canned sardines.

But the Venusians would not be put off. Suddenly one of the men hurled a stone axe which grazed Curt's shoulder; the mob sprang at them. Curt's men were forced to use their guns to turn them back. Four of the Venusians were shot, and the pilot of the helicopter was beaten to death.

Throughout the night the Venusians circled in the shadows beyond the tent, barking among themselves. Judging from the sounds they made, Curt guessed that the size of the mob grew steadily. Occasionally a spear lashed out of the darkness and struck the ground near the fire. Sleepless, Curt kept watch, a Tommy-gun cradled in his arm.

In the light of dawn he saw hundreds of Venusians milling in front of the expedition tent. As the light brightened, their barking grew louder. Here and there small groups burst into frenzied dancing.

Outside the walls Curt saw a large phalanx of lizards moving stealthily across the clearing toward the bridge. He hoped the new threat might deflect the Venusian attack, but the interest of the natives did not waver.

A purposeful band of Venusians moved toward the tent, symbolically offering trade goods. Hoping that surrender would give him the time he needed to evacuate the expedition, Curt flung them four cigarettes. But the gesture precipitated the attack. The Venusian delegation fell quarreling over the spoils; and the screaming mob surged forward. Curt backed into the tent. Behind an improvised barrier the guns began to chatter. The first wave of Venusians fell; the others stopped thirty feet from the tent, screaming and dancing and brandishing their spears.

"We have to push them back, or we won't be able to get out," Commander Clark shouted to Curt above the din. "A small bomb ought to scare them off."

"The bombs are all in the rocket, and the pilot—"

"I can fly the helicopter, Curt."

"Thanks. Thanks, Mike." Curt held out his hand. After a long hesitation, Clark shook it limply. He turned and scurried through a rain of arrows to the helicopter. As the ship rose from the ground, the second wave of Venusians closed upon the tent. Across the clearing the lizards moved closer to the bridge.

Curt stood up to fire at the mob. A spear struck his shoulder, spinning him back into the tent. He pulled himself groggily to his feet. The others were firing frantically at the swirling naked bodies. Curt's arm hung limp and numb. Blood spurted through a rent that had been torn in his nylon blouse.

"Hallen! Can you hear me?" It was Clark's voice, filtered by the two-way radio at the back of the tent. "Unfortunately, you can't answer, Hallen; I put your transmitter out of commission this morning. Under the circumstances, it seemed desirable for you not to be able to contact the rocket again.

"I want you to know the truth, Hallen. You'll say I'm mad, of course. You're welcome to your opinion. Perhaps I am. Who knows? Madness is a condition differently defined by every society. And when a whole culture has gone mad, who can point out

the sane man? For we are mad, you know.

"You asked me once what had happened on Mars. You know the truth, now. There was no virus. Nothing but civilization. A friendly, naive people. I could visualize us hauling them back to our zoos, or cooing over them in the parlor, and—

"I'll do the same thing here—with variations, naturally. Even a Congressional committee wouldn't swallow that virus story a second time. I'll tell the men in the rocket you've ordered me to take it back to the satellite—to prevent further rusting. But we won't stop there, Hallen. Somewhere in space I'll open the airlock, and we'll have our monument, you and I—an empty cubicle forever darting across the face of eternity. After two disasters, it'll be a long time before Congress appropriates more funds for Solar exploration. Perhaps, in the interval, Mars and Venus will grow up enough to meet us on our own terms."

Curt pulled himself slowly to his feet, swaying dizzily. He saw the lizards were crossing the bridge, driving the Venusian natives back with their parasite snakes. Curt raised a rifle and aimed it at the helicopter which still floated overhead; but, before he could pull the trigger, the

ship swept away and was hidden by the ivy-trees.

Curt collapsed. The battle was over. Lizards swarmed into the tent. One of Curt's men weakly raised his pistol. The lizard's forepaws fluttered, and in a sing-song squeal he cried human words.

"You safe, all! Come to us!"

Unconsciousness shut down upon Curt's mind.

When he opened his eyes, he lay on a foamy, green pallet in a low-ceilinged, gold-walled room. A soft, transparent, stickily gelatinous material was heaped over his wounded shoulder.

"At last, Curt!"

He turned his head. Alice Hughes sat on a couch beside him, her leg bound to a board by a mound of the gelatine.

"I broke it when they captured me," she explained. "That's why I couldn't come myself and tell you the awful mistake we've made. They wouldn't hear of it; they said my leg wouldn't heal properly. And, Curt, there was so little they could do themselves, because they hadn't learned any of our words yet."

"They?"

"The lizards. They were at such a disadvantage against us. They're not at all warlike, and they have no weapons except

their trained snakes. They've brought you to their capital. I've seen some of the city, Curt, and—"

"You mean that gold village we found in the forest?"

"Gracious, no! Those buildings were simply concession booths." She laughed. "I know it isn't funny. We've lost the rocket; we've no way of going home—ever—because Venus has no native metal except gold; and there are only twelve of us still alive—four women and eight men. Yet it's our own fault, Curt; we were such awful fools! You even told me the truth. At least you know it in words, although emotionally—"

"I knew the truth?"

"You said we couldn't interpret Venus in terms of our own past experiences, but we did precisely that, from the time we first saw the lizards. On Venus it's the reptile that evolved rationality; that hypothesis never occurred to us."

"But there were men behind the transparent wall, Alice!"

"The most dangerous animal species on Venus; men only in the superficials of physical appearance. Curt, we have to make new definitions. Man is a synonym for the cerebral cortex, for the ability to solve problems. Man doesn't mean a biological

shape, automatically superior to every other animal because the shape happens to resemble ours. Think about that transparent wall, Curt, and the enormous beetle we saw trapped in the forest. I was right, remember? I said the beetle was in a cage. If we'd looked farther, we'd have found others—all in neat, natural settings for easy viewing. I called it a park, too, Curt."

"You mean to tell me, Alice, that we landed our rocket in—"

"On the one Venusian island where we could make the mistake we did. We'd have found their cities on any of the others. We acted on a totally false hypothesis, Curt, because we had insufficient data, and we classified it according to our own past experiences."

He smiled and relaxed on the green lounge. "I wonder what would have happened, Alice, if Venusians had landed on the Earth at—say—the San Diego Zoo?"

"Turn your question around, Curt. Would we have recognized them as rational people as quickly as they did us?"

"I'll answer that with another question: how long does it take a man to change his basic definitions? Perhaps we're fortunate we'll never know the answer. I'd hate to believe that Mike Clark was right."