

PLANET STORIES



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I jumped into the ship and sealed the port.

THE VENUS EVIL

By Chester S. Geier

In the sweet Venusian spring, when iridescent butterflies swarmed and deer-things scampered, it was both necessary and good for Richard Farris to kill George Pearce.

IN MY MIND the memory is still painful and raw, like a wound that has refused to heal. I have only to close my eyes to see Pearce leaping toward me, his face a twisted mask of fear and rage.

And I can feel the machine-pistol jerking in my hand as a stream of tungsten-steel pellets stopped his maddened rush, washing away all motion and expression in the utter quiescence of death.

Yes, I killed George Pearce, whom the world will remember as one of its greatest chemical scientists and one of the three members of the ill-fated first expedition to Venus. I *had* to kill him.

To explain the circumstances which led to it requires that I start at the beginning. Police authorities have ordered me to make this statement as clear and detailed as possible.

Everyone recalls the furor created by the privately sponsored launching of the first rocket to Mars, which beat by several months a government project aimed at the same goal. The government rocket blew up a short distance beyond the Heavside Layer, but a little over a year and a half later the privately-owned space vessel returned. And a new furor was aroused, not so much by the fact that the expedition had successfully returned as that it brought back a large fortune in gold, platinum, and gems. The explorers as well as their backers were each made financially independent for the rest of their lives.

Man's natural cupidity was excited to fever pitch. The planets were no longer regarded as milestones on the road to scientific knowledge, but as store houses brimming with fabulous treasures. More rockets were hastily launched by various groups in different countries, but the attempts were defeated by the very impatience which inspired them. The rockets, too quickly and inefficiently constructed, exploded soon after leaving Earth, or, if they reached outer space at all, were never heard from again.

It was this state of affairs that prevailed when Anson Durwent finished the construction of the *Solarian*. A scientific genius made wealthy by various patents, he built the vessel entirely out of his own funds. Nor were his motives those of amassing further wealth, for the conditions which he set were that the *Solarian* was to conduct a true voyage of exploration, and that any profits arising from the discovery of precious metals or minerals were to be divided equally among everyone involved in the expedition.

The crew of the *Solarian* consisted of George Pearce, Barton Sandley, and myself, Richard Farris. Three or less was the usual number on these early rockets, due to the demands upon space made by

fuel, food, and equipment. Pearce was the chemist and captain of the expedition, Sandley the biologist and photographer, and I the physicist and pilot.

None of the excitement produced by interplanetary ventures was attendant upon our takeoff. Only a few newscasters whom Durwent had notified at the very last minute were present. And these were bored by something which had become mere routine, and were plainly skeptical of our chances for success.

Our objective was the mysterious, cloud-covered planet Venus. It was an obvious choice, since it was the nearest planet to Earth other than Mars, and as far as we knew had not yet been reached.

I SHALL NOT DETAIL the long flight through space, monotonous after the first novelties had died. But it is necessary to record that the interminable months and the restricted confines of the ship produced a strain upon our nerves that led to frequent, heated quarrels over the most trivial matters. It is certain that the effect upon our minds caused a serious unbalance, explaining many of the irrational actions which we made later.

The landing upon the surface of Venus was the most difficult part of the voyage. I brought the ship down through the miles-deep layer of clouds like a blind man groping for obstructions in an unfamiliar room. Once under the clouds, however, our progress was easier. I forgot my exhaustion in a surge of renewed eagerness for exploration.

After a short discussion between Pearce, Sandley, and myself, it was agreed to take an aerial reconnaissance before landing. I sent the *Solarian* into a slow cruise over the surface, while Sandley busied himself with the special cameras and Pearce began taking samples of the atmosphere.

Venus proved to be a wild and fantastic world. To picture it in any great detail is impossible. It was too vast, too different. My mind retains only a sort of montage of turbulent seas dotted with immense islands, mighty jagged mountains, and endless lush sprawling jungles in unearthly yellow and green hues. And it seemed to exude an aura of vibrant youth, a kind of primeval grandeur.

We saw no cities, buildings, or other

indications of the existence of intelligent beings. I don't believe we expected to find any. On Mars there had been only incalculably ancient ruins, long since crumbled into dust. Mars had been too old for a civilized race, as Venus was too young.

Our survey quickly showed that an island on one part of the planet was as wild and rugged as an island on another, so that a landing site could be chosen haphazardly for all the difference it made. We selected a relatively clear area in a great valley on one of the islands that happened to be under us at the time, and I brought the *Solarian* to rest. Only then did I realize how tired I was.

Pearce, rechecking his initial tests of the atmosphere, reported that the carbon dioxide content was not as high as had been expected. We would be able to venture from the ship without the necessity of wearing oxygen helmets. The lighter gravity of Venus, lessening muscular effort and thereby the need for deep or quick breathing, would be an aiding factor.

We didn't leave the ship immediately, however. Like myself, Pearce and Sandley had become aware upon landing of being exhausted, and it was agreed to sleep first. Later we ate, and then arming ourselves with machine-pistols and various pieces of scientific equipment, we unsealed the port and stepped out upon the surface of Venus.

It was warm and humid, but not oppressively so. The air seemed strangely heavy to our lungs, laden with a host of rich, exotic odors. There was a deep, somnolent quiet, broken at intervals by faint pipings and twitterings from unseen creatures that might have been birds. A warm, soft wind stirred the vivid foliage of queer trees and shrubs at the edges of the clearing.

Sandley murmured, "Not bad at all. Eden must have been a little like this."

Pearce shrugged. "Maybe—but we'd better keep in mind that this is a strange world. There may be dangers here of which we know nothing as yet."

With this admonition prominent in our thoughts, we got to work, setting up our equipment, analyzing samples and making notes. The days that followed were more or less a repetition of this. We were constantly on the alert at first and seldom

wandered very far from the ship. But as we encountered no inimical life-forms, either plant or animal, we were gradually encouraged to roam further and further beyond the clearing.

SANDLEY was busy with his camera, when not otherwise occupied with biological studies. He was often gone for hours at a time. I was thrown much in Pearce's company, since my work was frequently connected in various ways with his.

"I wonder if we'll turn up anything, like they did on the Mars expedition," Pearce said one day, gazing about him with a narrow, speculative look.

I asked, "How do you mean?"

"Stuff that will bring money back on Earth," Pearce said. "Gold, for example."

For some reason which I couldn't explain just then, I found myself clutching eagerly at the thought. "It's possible," I said. "We've hardly scratched the surface as yet."

Pearce gazed searchingly at me for a moment. Finally he asked, "What was your motive for accompanying this expedition, Farris? To advance the cause of science? Or what?"

"Why . . . to get some profit out of it."

The reason which had puzzled me was suddenly clear. I recalled abruptly the hopes and dreams I'd had, overlooked in the wonders of exploration.

Pearce nodded. "Exactly. And the same applies to me." His tone became bitter. "Being famous in your chosen line of work is nice, but it doesn't buy you much. At least, it doesn't buy the things that really matter. Newscast blurbs, banquet invitations, and honorary memberships hardly provide the fancy style of living they suggest. Awards and prizes are too small and too far between to build a complete, private laboratory."

I said, "And that's what you want?"

"That's what I intend to get, somehow," Pearce said. He studied me again. "What about you, Farris? What's your ambition?"

"Financial independence, mainly. There are certain ideas that I'd like to work on. I'd never get the time or the money while earning a living as assistant to a man like Durwent."

"Then this might be the chance we both need. If we could turn up something

valuable, like the Mars explorers did . . ." Pearce nibbled his lip, frowning intently over the thought. Abruptly he grabbed my arm. "Parris, we've got to find something! Look—suppose we forget the scientific side of the expedition? Suppose we make it an outright treasure hunt?"

"Venus is big," I said doubtfully. "And our supplies won't last forever. If we fail to find anything, the scientific data we'd gather would give us something to capitalize on."

We didn't discuss the matter further, for just then Sandley returned from one of his photographing jaunts. He seemed greatly excited.

"Just discovered a new form of life," he announced triumphantly. "Saw the creatures at a distance, but from what I was able to make out, they look something like overgrown butterflies. Had large, brightly colored wings, anyway. Have to catch a specimen." Sandley's spectacled, owlish features turned puzzled. "Can't understand why I haven't noticed the creatures before. Seem to have appeared only recently."

"Where were you?" Pearce asked.

"Near the upper end of the valley. It's rocky there, with lots of ore outcroppings. Might contain valuable elements. You fellows ought to go with me next time."

"We'll do that," Pearce said. He glanced at me significantly.

We went with Sandley the following day. We took along our machine-pistols, a few pieces of light equipment, and some food. Sandley, of course, had his camera. It was the first time that Pearce and I had gone any great distance from the ship, and we were more than ordinarily uneasy. But the possibility that we might discover ores or minerals of value was too tempting to resist.

We moved through a deep quiet, broken only by occasional twitters or trills. We caught frequent glimpses of the creatures emitting the sounds as they fluttered among the branches of the vivid, unearthly trees. They resembled birds in a way, having feathered wings, but their bodies were lizard-like and covered with bright, rainbow-hued scales. And several times animals bounded from our path that looked like nothing so much as tiny deer. These seemed to be quite numerous.

The vegetation gradually thinned out as the ground became increasingly rocky. Ahead of us loomed the rugged, precipitous ascent of the valley's upper end.

Sandley stopped, peering about him. "This is the place." Abruptly he pointed. "There—the butterfly-creatures! See them?"

Pearce and I followed the direction of his finger. Against the mottled gray wall of the ascent, a number of bright shapes fluttered. As we watched, they drifted slowly toward us, circling aimlessly. We were able presently to see them in clearer detail. I stared as a realization of something strange struck into me. I heard Pearce gasp.

For the butterfly-creatures were not insects, or anything even remotely resembling them. Nor were they a strange form of animal life. They were *things*, utterly alien and weird.

IMAGINE large, irregularly-shaped pieces of thin paper fluttering through the air, each being creased in the middle, the two halves flapping like the wings of a butterfly. The things were remarkably like that. But they were alive in some incredible way, and their actions seemed purposeful, directed. They looked delicate and fragile, almost unsubstantial, mere veils of prismatic light. And they possessed a bizarre, unearthly beauty. As they circled high overhead, occasionally dipping toward us in what might have been curiosity, their wings shimmered and pulsed in a hypnotic play of rainbow color.

The butterfly-creatures—to call them that for want of a better name—did not come near us. They continued to spiral high overhead, as though we at once attracted and puzzled them.

Sandley unlimbered his camera and began taking pictures of the things. Pearce and I, recalling the motive that had brought us there, gradually moved away, searching the ground for promising bits of rock and crystal. We were intent on our quest, and wandered quite a distance. Before long, we found ourselves among the tumbled boulders at the foot of the ascent.

As I searched the rocky debris between the boulders, a reddish glitter caught my eye. It came from a small crystalline object half hidden in the gravel. I bent

curiously to pick it up—and a thrill of incredulous delight flashed through me. For the object was a great jewel, roughly oval, faceted, and a deep ruby red. It was exquisitely beautiful, yet totally unlike anything that had ever been found on Earth. It did not just reflect light, but glowed with a soft, steady radiance of its own. Glorious rose and scarlet shades pulsed and swirled within it, in a never-ending play of patterns and hues that was fascinating to watch.

I held the gem in my hand for a long moment, staring at it, a little numbed. My find seemed much too good to be true. It was almost as if a kindly god had granted a hopeless wish.

I thought suddenly of Pearce, and motion returned to me. Pearce had moved some distance up the ascent. It took a moment to locate him behind the boulders which had hidden him from view.

Pearce was bending over in an intent scrutiny of the ground. As he caught the sound of my approach, he straightened sharply and one of his hands flashed behind his back as though to hide something from view. I was too wrapped up in the news of my discovery, however, to pay much attention to his actions just then.

"Look at what I've found," I told him, holding out the gem in my palm.

Pearce failed to look surprised. He grinned in an embarrassed sort of way, and brought his hand from behind his back. Cupped within it were two gems similar to mine.

"Found a couple myself," he said. "I was so excited that I must have forgotten where I was. When I heard you coming, my first thought was to hide them."

It seemed a strangely weak explanation. I realized that Pearce's consuming desire for financial gain had warped his sense of ethics. His action of a moment before had been nothing more or less than a conscious, deliberate effort to conceal his find. He had abandoned secrecy only after he knew that I had made an identical discovery. I made a mental note to be on guard. Pearce had given sufficient indication that he would not play entirely fair in the future.

He grinned eagerly in what might have been an attempt to cover up the awkwardness of the situation. "Farris, these gems

are going to bring money back on Earth. They're unusual, not like the ordinary kinds brought back by the Mars explorers."

I shrugged. "The money won't be enough to do us much good unless we can find more of the gems. Remember, any profits we make have to be split four ways, counting Sandley and Durwent."

"I'm certain that we'll find more," Pearce said. "I've found two, and you one. If that's any indication, there should be a lot of them scattered around. Come on, Farris, let's look."

I nodded in renewed eagerness, and we began the search. A disinterested observer might have found our actions comical as we probed with anxious, almost frantic, haste among the boulders. It didn't seem funny to us, of course. We had speculated more or less constantly during the entire voyage over the possibility of locating a source of wealth on Venus, and this was our chance. No, it wasn't funny at all. It was very real, and clear, and logical.

I don't know how much time passed. I was too absorbed in my search to pay much heed to anything else.

At intervals, I found three more gems. Each find came at a point when I was about ready to give up, spurring me on to new efforts. I might have continued indefinitely if Pearce hadn't suddenly called my name.

His voice was tense, insistent. Something important seemed to have happened.

WHEN I rejoined Pearce, he pointed silently down the ascent, in the direction from which we had come. His features were startled, bewildered, a little frightened. My own face must have registered similar feelings at what I saw.

Beyond the boulders at the foot of the ascent, one of the tiny deer-like animals that we frequently saw lay sprawled on the ground. Several butter-fly-creatures rested motionlessly upon its body. A short distance away stood another of the deer-like animals, literally surrounded by the butterfly things. It was as still as though frozen, its great eyes distended and staring. And the wings of the butterfly-creatures hovering about it were moving in a slow, hypnotic rhythm. I thought of the snakes of Earth which captured birds

by charming them through similar movements, and realized that somewhat the same thing was happening here.

As I watched, the deer-like animal abruptly fell on its side and lay without moving. Like vultures swooping down on a victim, the butterfly things settled upon it. They seemed in some obscure way to be . . . *feeding*.

I glanced in consternation at Pearce. "What do you suppose it's all about?"

He moved his shoulders uneasily. "I don't know any more than you do. But I think we'd better look into this. And it might not be wise to let those things get too close."

Presently, the butterfly-creatures rose once more into the air and fluttered away. The deer-like animals, though, lay very still.

Pearce gestured, and I followed him to the scene. Only a short examination of the two deer-like animals was necessary to show what had happened to them. They were dead. There wasn't so much as a mark upon the sleek skin of their bodies—but they were dead.

Pearce and I stared at each other. And then a chilling thought struck me.

"Sandley!" I gasped. "We haven't heard anything from him for hours. Do you suppose . . . ?"

Pearce didn't answer. He turned and began running toward where we had last seen Sandley. I hurried after him, anxiety a sick ache inside me.

Slipping and sliding over loose rocks and gravel, we at last emerged from behind the line of tumbled boulders and reached level ground. We didn't see Sandley at once. He had obviously moved from where we had left him. Then I noticed a small cloud of butterfly-creatures hovering over something on the ground about a hundred yards or so down the boulder line. An outstretched leg, all that was visible to us from where we stood, provided identification. It was Sandley.

Heedless of danger, Pearce and I rushed forward. When we reached Sandley, the last of what must originally have been a horde of butterfly-creatures was leaving his motionless form. We were too late. Our terrible knowledge hadn't come soon enough.

In an abrupt, overwhelming fury, I

pointed my machine-pistol at the fluttering demons and sent a stream of pellets into their midst. The force of the barrage would have cut a man in two, but the things didn't seem to be affected in the slightest way. The pellets went through them as though they were no more solid than shadows.

THE THINGS made no move toward Pearce and myself, but continued to circle aimlessly overhead. They seemed too sated from whatever ghastly feast they had made upon Sandley to be interested in us just then. Having made certain of this, Pearce and I performed a quick examination of Sandley, which confirmed what we already knew—that he was dead. And there wasn't a mark upon him.

Keeping a close watch upon the butterfly things, Pearce and I gave Sandley a hasty burial. Then I wrapped his belongings in my shirt, and together Pearce and I ran back to the ship. It wasn't until the port had been shut behind us that I felt safe.

I prepared a light meal, which Pearce and I ate in brooding silence. Finally Pearce said, "What I can't understand is why the butterfly things should have attacked Sandley. It isn't logical for the life forms of one world to prey upon the life forms of another. There are too many differences."

"I've been thinking about that myself," I answered. "The solution seems to be that the butterfly-creatures feed upon something common to all life forms—the mysterious electrical force that gives matter the peculiar property of being alive."

Pearce shrugged, and after a moment his face brightened. "Anyway, we now have one less to divide with." He reached into a pocket, placing upon the table seven of the large crimson gems. I added the four that I had found, and for some seconds we gazed dreamily at our hoard.

"People on Earth are going to fight like mad to own one of these gems," Pearce said softly. "By selling the gems slowly, playing one buyer against another, our profits will be plenty big."

I nodded. "It won't make us very popular, but the end justifies the means."

"I wish we had some means of protection against those butterfly things, so that we could look for more of the gems,"

Pearce said. "They're dangerous, and we don't seem to be able to harm them."

"We could move the ship over to the ascent," I suggested. "Then it would be near enough for us to jump in whenever any of the things got too close."

Pearce grinned in delight. "That's the answer!"

I moved the ship the next day. The stratagem worked satisfactorily enough, enabling us to find almost a dozen more of the crimson jewels. But the need for constant watchfulness proved to be an increasing strain upon our nerves. And the number of the butterfly-creatures seemed to be growing. It seemed to be a season for the things, as late Spring brings the appearance of butterflies on Earth.

At last our treasure hunt became too dangerous to continue. The butterfly-creatures were too numerous, and in addition the gems had grown too hard to find. Pearce and I decided on one last trip, and this on his own argumentative insistence.

It was during that final search that I made the discovery which led to Pearce's death. I'd been probing among the rooks for an hour or so, meanwhile keeping a wary eye upon a group of butterfly-creatures circling in the sky some distance away. Suddenly I detected the telltale, reddish glitter of a gem. As I reached for it, a thin, tinkling sound startled me. I jerked erect, my senses flaring in alarm. But I saw nothing near me that indicated danger, and reached once more for the gem.

THE next instant I leaped frantically to my feet and ran into the ship, which rested nearby. I slammed shut the port, and leaned against it, breathing harshly from my exertions and from fright at the narrowness of my escape. Like the pieces of a puzzle falling together, something became horribly clear to me. And I knew suddenly just what I had to do.

From the box in which Pearce and I had kept them, I took the gems. Then I left the ship, first having made certain that none of the butterfly-creatures were near, and with a large rock pounded each and every one of the gems to bits.

I was finishing this task when Pearce returned. He stared at me and asked:

"Why, what in the world have you been doing?"

I pulled my machine-pistol from its holster, pointed it at him, and explained. I couldn't have taken any chances with Pearce. I knew what his reaction would be. I wasn't wrong.

He seemed to go mad. His face darkened with a terrible, overwhelming fury. "Lies! All lies!" he shrieked. "It's just a plot to trick me out of my share."

I tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen to me. He shouted down my attempts with unspeakable profanity. My machine-pistol was the only thing that kept him from tearing at me like an insensate beast.

I was trying to get Pearce to calm down when several butterfly-creatures suddenly darted toward us. They had evidently been circling nearer and nearer while we talked, seizing the opportunity presented by our inattention.

My eyes jerked to the things instinctively—and as I did so, Pearce leaped toward me. In pure reaction, I squeezed the trigger. The stream of tungsten-steel pellets stopped him like a wall. Even if I'd had the time to deliberate consciously over whether or not to shoot, it wouldn't have ended any other way. For if Pearce had reached me, a struggle would have followed which would have enabled the butterfly-creatures to attack us.

Just an instant ahead of the butterfly-creatures, I jumped into the ship and sealed the port. After resting for a while, I set out on the return to Earth.

I told the authorities my story in full, holding nothing back. They asked me to make this statement for their official records. There are, of course, no charges against me. I should not have admitted to killing Pearce had I been guilty of a crime. But I fear that the shadow of suspicion will lay over me until another expedition returns from Venus and verifies my words.

And in late Spring, when the cocoons open and the butterflies emerge, I will always think of a similar season on Venus, when a similar event occurs. When the crimson gems break open with a thin, tinkling sound, and the exquisite, deadly butterfly-creatures flutter forth . . .