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ON THE COVER: *Painting by Rudolph Belarski depicts a scene from Ford Smith's story, VENUSIAN NIGHTMARE.*

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Carter fired his ray-gun into the fanged red mouth of the apparition

VENUSIAN NIGHTMARE

By FORD SMITH

Miriam Montez Embogs Rival Telecasters in the Legendary Secret of the Miasmíc, Unexplored Venusian Great Sink!

ACROSS the flat and rubbery expanse of slimy-looking soil the three men carefully and steadily slogged their way. They dared not halt, even for a minute, because immediately they would start sinking into the semi-viscous stuff, in reality only a slightly harder crust over a sea of gelatinous ooze.

At first there had been a bit of panic on the part of Morton and Doville. But Carter had quickly straightened them out and started them moving in the right direction.

For four hours now, they had been struggling onward but it meant death to stop and rest.

As far as they could see there was

nothing save the wettish, broad-leaved plants with their sickly green fuzz and abominable odor of rot and decay. Nothing but fetid odors lifted above the dreary, miasmíc level of the Venusian Great Sink.

Overhead, occasionally glimpsed through the sullenly roiling clouds that constantly veiled the heavens, was the yellowish disk of the sun—considerably larger than as seen from Earth and yet shining dimly like a fog light through a heavy mist.

The heat was terrific—a cloying, stifling blanket that sapped the very strength of their heartbeats.

Carter, the Interplanetary Police Officer, glanced at his electronic wrist

compass-watch for the hundredth time to make sure of his direction. Hatless and haggard, his blond hair glowed queerly in the eerie light. His face was grim, his blue eyes, bleak.

He had a triple duty now—to get his two companions safely out of this acute danger and then investigate the cause of their inexplicable disaster. This, on top of his original mission.

“According to the map,” he panted, “it is only about ten miles farther across this trackless bog to Crowder’s mine. It will be that low-lying hill over there on the horizon. We’ve got to make it before nightfall.”

“Night couldn’t fall on this crazy spot,” gasped Morton, whipping off the perspiration running from his brown-thatched scalp down across his usually pleasant face. “It would only bog down in this garbage-pail atmosphere and get sucked under this soupy soil crust. How’d we ever get into this mess, anyway?”

“Don’t you remember?” murmured Doville in faint irony. The third man was slender and wiry, with a shock of vigorous black hair. “We asked for this assignment. Solarcast’s two star newscast men volunteered to cover the iratrum ore strike and the Crowder Process, and then telecast the news to the entire System—if the I-P censors will release it from the tight beam.”

MORTON grimaced with annoyance. “I didn’t mean that,” he grunted, trudging wearily along in the I-P officer’s wake and avoiding Carter’s tracks which were quickly filling in with slimy ooze and blackish water. “Here we are in the middle of nowhere without supplies to keep us alive, much less a single scrap of transmission equipment. We should have stayed with the ship and continued sending out flash signals for help from Venus City.”

“And sunk into this bottomless morass along with the craft,” added Carter curtly over his shoulder. “We’d have been buried alive in less than an hour. It’s tough on you chaps, but it’s lucky we weren’t forced down sooner. We have

an excellent chance of getting out of this difficulty by hiking on toward our destination on foot. You can telecast your story after we get back to Venus City.”

“Without projection of actual scenes, personal interviews, and such,” grumbled Morton. “Nice going. I wonder who could have left that fuel line open to strand us out here.”

“The only person I can think of is that Amazon from Univox,” commented Doville reflectively. “She got all excited last night when she learned we were here on Venus to cover the Crowder story. I could read her like a simple astrogation. She’s here on the same assignment for Univox Service.”

“Miriam Montez is not an Amazon,” objected Morton instantly. “Just because she couldn’t see your angular and craggy style of beauty in my dazzling presence you needn’t malign her now. And suppose she did try to strand us so she could beat us to Crowder for the news? Haven’t we pulled such—”

“If our fuel tanks were drained purposely,” interrupted Carter grimly, “it was not done just to strand us. Had we landed closer to the middle of this hellish bog we would have had no chance at all of getting out alive.”

“Could it have been a Crowder agent, then?” mused Morton.

“Why would Crowder want to kill the publicity we could give him?” demanded Doville. “This is the greatest iratrum strike anywhere in the System since the Lunar mines started playing out. Coupled with a revolutionizing method of extracting metallic iratex simply and quickly without going through the Bundersohn Process, it will make Amos Crowder the most famous man of the colonized worlds.”

“If all this is on the level,” added Carter. “The important thing right now is for us to get to the Crowder mine as soon as possible. Lucky there are no dangerous carnivores in this area. All I have in the way of a weapon is a hand ray-gun which won’t even stun a man beyond twenty paces. Your two primitive hunting knives are more of an advantage under the present circumstances.”

"Why are there no dangerous animals?" asked Doville.

"There couldn't be out here on the Great Sink. Anything of weight or substance would sink to death the minute it stopped moving. All animal life of Venus avoids this graveyard which is like a huge sea of quicksand."

"You know a lot about Venus, don't you, Carter?" asked Morton curiously. "Just what is this Great Sink?"

"I should," replied the I-P man. "I've spent most of my life here. But nobody knows anything about the Great Sink. Discovered in twenty-five eighty-seven by Theodore Voorhees, one of the early pioneers of Venus, the Great Sink comprises an area about one hundred miles wide and two hundred miles long. It consists of a soft, slimy gelatinous mass of sulphurous matter. Over its surface a thin soil of muddy, marshy consistency supports only a peculiar mulleinlike plant with some of the narcotic properties of *cannabis indica*.

"The bottom has never been sounded. Its formation or cause of formation is only theorized upon by scientists. The native Venusian legend is that this planet is a living entity and that the Great Sink is its eye. Whatever it is, no man from Earth or Venusian troglodyte has even traversed or explored it—and lived to tell the tale. If we make it to solid ground we will be unique."

Morton shuddered slightly. "I hope you don't believe that native stuff."

"Frankly, no. But Venus is a fetid, steamy, lusty green planet that has had less than ten percent of its surface explored. There is no telling what terrible mysteries are hidden by the teeming jungles, seas and dense clouds.

"Approximately the same geologic age as the Earth and Mars, it has cooled much slower than Earth. As Mars has aged faster than Earth, so Earth has aged faster than Venus. Some day, when I retire from the I-P, I intend to explore on Venus."

THEY toiled on, forcing their tiring muscles to respond. Once Doville stepped into an extra soft spot and sank

to his waist before Carter and Morton could drag him clear. It was a narrow escape from the odious, bubbling, sucking morass.

They were trembling and spent as they neared the low hummock of hills which marked the beginning of solid ground. Further conversation languished as they hastened toward salvation.

In spite of their calm and matter-of-fact of facing things, their present plight was terribly dangerous, and they all three knew it. If their legs gave out, if they stooped to rest, or if night were to overtake them, they were lost.

Without food or water for more than eight hours, spent and well-nigh exhausted; they neared the rising ground ahead of them just as the queer daylight deepened into murky gloom. To their ears now came the steady *thump-thump* of some sort of drilling machinery, and the soft ground quivered beneath their feet from the rhythmic vibration.

They could make out several dome-shaped low buildings before them and a dump of ore deposits which had been taken from the ground. There was a magnetic tipple and a steep trestle beyond. But not a living soul was apparent around the mining camp.

"Look!" exclaimed Morton suddenly, pointing. "What's that in the cleared space?"

"A rocket ship!" cried Doville and Carter together.

"Probably Crowder's," added Carter. "Come on, and walk alertly. I may not have told you exactly why I was sent with you, but the truth is that the natives are restless and there is danger of an uprising. My job is to find out why."

They approached the rocket ship and felt of its sleek iratex side.

"This isn't Crowder's ship," announced Carter. "It has the insignia of a sun, star and crescent above its serial number. Isn't that the Univox emblem?"

"Miriam Montez!" cried Doville. "So that wench beat us here!"

"But where is she now?" demanded Morton anxiously. "Where is anybody?"

"Come on," ordered Carter, drawing

his ray-gun and leading the way to the central dome. "This building must cover the main mine shaft."

They encountered neither friend nor foe as they entered the dome. They found the circular room lighted by krypton bulbs overhead, and discovered the source of the machinery noise at the same time.

This was the powerhouse of the camp, and the huge dynamo was whirring smoothly. The *thump-thump* sound seemed to be coming up from the elevator shaft. The cage was at the top, deserted and silent.

A trampled white garment lay on the floor of the lift. Morton uttered a cry and sprang forward to snatch it up. It proved to be a woman's bolero style jacket.

"Miriam's!" cried Morton. "Gods of space! What can have happened here?"

"There's plenty wrong," stated Carter grimly. "The Veenies seem to have deserted the camp. Come on, we'll go down."

The two telecast men glanced at each other and then with one accord followed the I-P man into the cage. Carter gingerly set the mechanism in motion, and the lift smoothly descended the mine shaft—into what?

For nearly five hundred feet the cage went down. Just as they were wondering if the descent were to last forever, the automatic relay clicked, and the lift came to rest on the bottom. A krypton-lighted corridor cut out of the living rock led off to their right. The drilling *thump-thump*, louder than ever, was coming from this stope.

"Wait!" ordered Carter as Morton started precipitously along the corridor. "If my directions are not confused, that heads straight toward the Great Sink. A hundred yards, and it must plunge through the rock into that slimy sea of ooze."

"If it did, this tunnel would be flooded," argued Morton. "I'm going to see what happened to Miriam."

"Take it easy," cautioned Carter. "Let's stay together."

Slowly and cautiously they advanced

for nearly three hundred feet in a straight direction. The thumping grew louder constantly. All at once the tunnel widened into a cavern hewn out of the rock. Sparkling threads of iratrum ore glittered in the walls.

At the far end of the chamber a gigantic drill was working away automatically in a horizontal bore against the wall. All around was the litter and rubble of unremoved ore.

BUT what riveted their eyes before all else was the sight of Miriam Montez scantily attired in the rest of her white plastex suit. Bound with rope to a short stone column, the girl, her lovely black hair streaming down over her shoulders, stared out at them in dazed horror.

At her feet lay the body of Amos Crowder and the geologist-scientist wasn't a pretty thing to look at. His head had been beaten into a pulp.

"The Veenies have revolted," said Carter quickly. "But where in the name of space imps have they gone?"

"Jack Morton! Carl Doville!" screamed the girl, arousing at sight of the three men. "Thank God, you've come."

The two Solarcast men leaped forward to release the Univox representative. Carter peered sharply around the cavern, seeing nothing suspicious. Then he moved forward to examine the monument to which the girl was tied.

"A Venusian obelisk," he observed in amazement. "Now, how did that get down here?"

"The native miners revolted," explained the girl hysterically. "They left me here as some sort of sacrifice to the Eye. They killed Doctor Crowder, and they fled."

"How long have you been here?" asked Morton, sawing away at her bonds.

"For hours," the girl sobbed. "The attack came without warning. The natives killed all of Crowder's assistants and then brought him and me down here. I don't understand the Venusian dialects very well, but they seemed to be babbling something about invading the socket of

the Great Eye in this pursuit of iratrum ore."

Doville attacked the bonds on his side. He looked up rather sourly at the captive Univox newswoman. "So you didn't have time to telecast the Crowder story, huh?"

"I didn't even have a chance to set up my equipment," admitted the girl.

"Maybe Crowder stalled you along, too, eh?" pursued Doville. "He was expecting Morton and me from Solarcast—not a treacherous female from Univox."

"Not now, Doville," snapped Morton. "Let's get her out of this mess first."

"The devil with not now," growled Doville. "Look at me, Montez! I'm covered with slime from the waist down. I darn near lost my life in that quagmire out there. She botched our fuel line, didn't she? We barely escaped the Great Sink."

"Oh, I'm sorry," cried the girl. "I didn't know it was that dangerous. I just wanted to get here first. I only meant to delay you men."

"You almost overdid yourself, young woman," stated Carter grimly. "People who don't know conditions on strange planets should not meddle with matters. If I had met you last night myself, I could have told you what you were up against. This is no job and no place for a woman, anyway."

"I resent that," said the girl with a flash of spirit. "Men and women take equal responsibilities and risks in our present civilization."

"And share all the dangers," added Carter. "Well, we've got to get out of here and flash the alarm to Venus City about this uprising. We can settle our personal differences later. I've got to shut off this confounded drill somehow."

Doville reeled back on his knees with a strangled cry. "Look!" he shouted. "The end wall is caving!"

So it was. With a rumbling roar the entire end of the cavern where the drill was grinding away now came crashing down to bury the tool. Like a blast, a foul odor as of rotting fish swept into the chamber, just ahead of a tide of

greenish mud and slime.

Then, before the semi-liquid filth could inundate the cavern, it was stopped as by an obstruction. A crescendo of hissing filled the cave, as though a dozen steam jets were venting.

AND then, through the gaping hole which had pierced to the Great Sink five hundred feet below the surface, there was framed what appeared to be a terrible face. Glowing greenly in the krypton lights, crowned with writhing tentacles which terminated in the fanged jaws of serpents, the face glared into the cave.

"Medusa!" whispered Doville in revulsion. "A Venusian Medusa!"

Morton, mercifully, did not see it. Neither did the girl. Morton severed the last rope which bound her to the obelisk and gathered Miriam up in his arms.

His face grim and set with horror, Carter crouched behind him and raised his ray-gun. He fired an electron stream of deadly energy pointblank at the fanged red mouth of the apparition.

"Run for the elevator!" he shouted. "If we don't get out of here at once we never will."

The two Solarcast men staggered back toward the lift. Carter retreated more slowly, continuing to fire his ray-gun. The sibilant hissing of the Great Sink horror rose in greater volume, and a queer muffled screaming issued from the mouth of the thing.

One taloned flipper, revoltingly suggestive of a human hand, clawed frantically at the edge of the orifice, digging and gouging the hole larger. Save for a blinding and dazzling of the creature, the ray-gun had no more effect than a child's water-pistol.

Carter's last glimpse of the horror was to see his taloned flipper snake on into the cave with an influx of bubbling green slime. Then he was back at the lift, and Doville was operating the controls.

Madly, the elevator whined up the shaft, followed by a nauseating wave of sulphurous, fishy stench. Something struck the wall of the bottom of the shaft with a mighty thud that made the

lift quiver like a live thing. But fortunately the dynamo, the power feed and the cable drums were at the top of the shaft, and the cage was not stopped.

BY THE time they reached the surface, the three men had regained control of themselves.

"What—what was it?" faltered the girl.

"Too bad you missed it," replied Doville bluntly. "That was the thing you almost sent all three of us down to feed. It was a Venusian model of Medusa, a charming monster of ancient Greek mythology on Earth."

"Do you think it will follow us up the shaft?" Morton asked Carter.

"I don't know," admitted the I-P man. "Although I hardly think so. The top of the shaft is above the level of the Great Sink."

But they were not yet out of danger. The ground beneath them heaved and tumbled in convulsive waves as they staggered and reeled their way toward the Univox rocket ship. Buildings collapsed and crumbled around them. The ground cracked as though in the throes of an earthquake.

Shaken and bruised, they tumbled inside the craft, and Carter made his way to the control chamber. As he charged the rockets and blasted off from the

trembling ground, a thick geyser of green slime and mud shot upward from the elevator shaft and jetted high in the night sky as though in a final desperate reach for the escaping prey.

"Good-by to Crowder's mine and extraction process," said Doville, gazing back and down from a port viewplate. "Anyway, we learned the Great Sink isn't an eye. It's a slimy sea of horrible nightmares."

"Maybe everything isn't lost," said Miriam, reaching into her waist belt. "Crowder gave me his notes to scan just before we were captured by the natives. It's only right that I surrender them to you men for saving my life."

"What!" exclaimed Morton, grabbing the papers and riffling hurriedly through them. "By Jupiter, you're right, Montez. Warm up the telecast, Doville. We'll share this news between us. And this process, if it's good, will compensate the System for the loss of Crowder's ore strike. Miriam, you're a four-square comrade."

"Don't forget to give Carter full credit for what he has done," said the girl. "He killed the—the Medusa."

"He did not," contradicted Carter over his shoulder. "But don't worry about me. I'm going back to land that fish with the snaky head as soon as I can get the right equipment together."

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