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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "Diana and the Golden Ring."

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GIRL FROM MARS

By Robert Bloch



“THE WILD Man from Borneo—he eats 'em alive—he eats 'em alive—”

Ace Clawson leaned against the side of the platform and listened to Lou, the spieler. Somebody had to listen to him, and there was no crowd in this lousy drizzle.



Obviously she was a fraud; she had no wings. But flying was actually the last thing she wanted to do . . .

The girl seemed to come out of nowhere. She stood in front of the tent and appeared to talk to herself as she pointed at the Girl From Mars poster.

The rain was letting up now as it got dark, but the afternoon storm had made mudpies in the Midway. Ace stared up the deserted carny street as the lights came on over the soggy tents and drooping banners of the **WORLD OF WONDER** shows. He shivered. This was a stinking climate

—no wonder these Georgia crackers got malaria.

Maybe it would stop raining soon. Maybe the marks would come down after supper. They'd better. Only two days left to play here and Ace wasn't off the nut yet. Well, that's the way some seasons went, just one bad break

after another.

Ace scratched his chin. Better shave. Ah, phooey on that. And phooey for Lou, too—blatting his brains out for nothing up there. He looked at the gawky spieler on the platform and grinned. Punk kid, his first season out, and he needed practice. Ace cocked his head and called.

"Hey, Lou!"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up!"

Lou shut up and climbed down. He tossed his head and Ace ducked the spray of raindrops. "You damn' fool, barking at nobody! Stuff it. Go inside and take the gang over to Sweeney for chow. We won't see a sucker around here for an hour yet."

"Sure, Ace."

Lou went inside and rounded up the Strange People. They came out single file; Fat Phyllis waddling along with little Captain Atom, Hassan the Fire-Eater puffing on one of his rancid shoe-pegs, Joe the Alligator Boy wearing a raincoat, Eddie in his Wild Man outfit.

Ace stood behind the ticket-stand. He didn't feel like talking to them. Somebody was bound to make a crack about Mitzie and Rajah. Nuts to that noise!

He watched them plod through the red clay of the Midway, then squinted up at the banners behind the platform. All the Strange People squinted back with their painted eyes—Phyllis, Captain Atom, the World's Smallest Man, the Mighty Hassan, the Alligator Boy, the Wild Man from Borneo, Rajah the Magician and the Girl From Mars.

Rajah the Magician, dressed in evening clothes and wearing a turban on his head, was sawing a woman in half. The Girl From Mars spread her bat-wings over the sky. Ace scowled at them and cursed.

They had to take a powder on him,

did they? Had to run out—and together! That's what hurt. They ran off together. Rajah and Mitzie. It was probably her idea, the tramp. Just giving him the old double-X behind his back. Laughing at him. Bad weather, a poor take, and on top of it she had to run out on him too!

Ace bit into his lower lip. That was all the supper he needed. That and a drink.

HE SAT down on the edge of the platform and pulled out his pint. Almost full. He pulled out the cork and threw it away. It wouldn't be needed again for this bottle.

Tilting his head back, he swallowed. One swig for the rain. One swig for the lousy Georgia crackers. One swig for Rajah and Mitzie. Yes, and one swig for what he'd do to that broad if he ever caught up with her.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the rain had stopped. And then, he saw the girl.

She came wandering up the Midway, walking very slow. She was wearing some kind of gray slacksuit, but he could tell it was a girl all right, even from far away, because the lights showed off her blonde hair.

Blonde hell, she was platinum; as she got closer he saw the bush on her head was almost white. Her eyebrows, too. Like one of those—what did they call 'em?—albinos. Only her eyes weren't pink. They were kind of platinum too. Starey eyes. She gawked at everything as she went past the pitches.

Ace watched her coming; he had nothing else to do. Besides, she was worth watching. Even with that slacksuit on, he could see that she was really stacked. But built! Long legs, and plenty of meat on the torso. A disheroo.

He slicked back his hair. When she passed the tent he'd step out and walk over, sort of smiling. Then—

Ace hesitated. Because the girl wasn't passing the tent. She came up to the end of the platform and stopped. She looked up and began to read the banners, moving her lips. She stood kind of funny, swaying a little as if she had a load. Maybe she did, at that. Anyhow, she rocked on her heels and stared up. She kept looking at one banner and mumbling to herself.

Ace turned his head. She was staring at the Girl From Mars. Yes, and that's what she was mumbling out loud, too; he could hear it.

"The Girl From Mars," she kept saying. She had a kind of a foreign accent. Blondie. Maybe a Swede or something.

"Something I can do for you?"

Ace swung over and came up behind her. She jumped about a foot.

"Teker—"

Swede all right. But built. She didn't wear any makeup. She didn't need to. Ace smiled at her.

"I'm Ace Clawson. Own this show. What can I do for you, sister?"

She sized him up and then looked back at the banner.

"The Girl From Mars," she said. "Is that truth?"

"Truth?"

"There is such a one? Inside there?"

"Uh—no. Not now. She scrambled."

"Kep?" The girl swallowed quickly. "I mean—what do you say?"

"She ran away. What's the matter, you don't talk English so good, huh?"

"English? Oh. Speech. Yes, I talk it." She spoke slowly, frowning. At least her eyebrows frowned, but her forehead didn't wrinkle. Her skin was gray, like the slacksuit. No buttons on the suit and she wasn't

carrying a purse. Foreigner.

"She did not po—possess wings?"

Ace grinned. "No. Fakeroe." She was beginning her frown act again and he remembered she was probably drunk. "It was a gag, see? There is no Girl From Mars."

"But I am from Rekk."

"What?"

"I am from Re—from Mars."

She was lushed to the gills. Ace stepped back. "Oh, yeah. Sure. You're from Mars, huh?"

"I came today."

"Well, well. Just like that, huh? Pleasure or business?"

"Kep?"

"Skip it. I mean, what's on your mind? What can I do for you?"

"Hungry."

Not only a lush, but a mooch, yet. But she was built. And when Ace put his hand on her shoulder, she didn't move away. Her shoulder was warm. The heat just poured off her. Hot stuff. And she was hungry—

ACE GLANCED at the tent-flap behind him. He was beginning to get an idea. It came to him when he put his hand on her shoulder. To hell with Mitzie. This was just what the doctor ordered. And the Midway was deserted. The gang wouldn't be back from Sweeney's for forty-five minutes yet.

"Hungry," the girl repeated.

"Sure. We'll get you something to eat. But let's talk first. Come on inside." Ace got another grip on her shoulder. Warm. Soft. Good stuff.

The lights inside were dim. Lou had switched off when he left. The flaps were down over the platforms against the tent walls, as they were during the grind when only one freak performed at a time. Ace led her over to the Girl From Mars platform. There was a cot inside and he could lower the flap. Take it easy

first, though.

She walked on her heels until he held her still and pushed her down on the steps on the side of the platform. Touching her made him want to hurry it up, even though he knew he had to be careful. The heat came off her in waves, and he was warm from the whiskey.

"So you're from Mars," he said, huskily, bending over her but remembering to keep a grin on his face. "How did you get here?"

"*Ertells*. The—machine. With the others. *Hydron*, very swift. Until we land. Then this, we did not expect. In the atmosphere. Electric."

"The storm? Lightning?"

She nodded expressionless. "You understand. The *kor*—the machine split. Broken. All *flerk*. All but I. I fell. And then I did not know. Because I had no orders. *Pre* was ended. You understand?"

Ace nodded. She was hot. God, she was hot. And built. He stepped back, still nodding. Let her finish. Maybe she'd sober up a little.

"So I walked. Nothing. Nobody. Dark. Then I saw light. This place. And the words. And you. I read the words."

"And here you are." Humor them. You got to humor them, dames and drunks. "How come you read English, and talk?"

"*Pre* did it. Education. Because he—planned we must come. Much I cannot know. I will understand. Now hungry."

There was no expression on her face. Lushes always twist their faces a lot. She didn't stagger, just walked on her heels was all. And there was no liquor smell from her. So—she wasn't drunk!

Ace stared.

He stared at the expressionless face, at the platinum hair and eyebrows. He stared at the sandals she

were, at the gray slacksuit without any pockets, without any buttons. No buttons. That was it. *She didn't have all her buttons.*

Yeah. Sure. She was a whack. She came here this afternoon, all right. Busted out of the county nut-house in the storm. No wonder she didn't carry a purse or anything. Just a lousy whack on the lam from the san.

Wouldn't that have to be the kind of break he got? A screwball with an empty gut and an empty noggin. That's all he needed. But she was *built*. And that's all he needed—

Why not?

ACE FIGURED fast. Half an hour, maybe. Long enough. He'd hustle her out of here right away. Nobody would know. It was a dirty trick, maybe. What the hell, he'd been getting the dirty end long enough himself; rain, no take, that damned Mitzie running out on him, no woman. He needed a change of luck. And besides, it wouldn't hurt her, maybe do her good. Nobody would find out anything and even if they did, she was a whack. Didn't know what she was saying, even. Why not?

"Hungry."

"Wait a minute, sister. I got a great idea. Come on back here for a second."

He motioned her to her feet, led the way up the steps, and lifted the flap. It was dark on the platform behind the canvas curtain. He groped for the couch, found it.

"Sit down here." He made his voice soft. She stood right next to him, not backing away, and when he pulled her down, pulled down all that heat and softness, she came without a sound.

He made himself wait, kept talking first.

"Yeah, I got a great idea. Why not? You're from Mars, ain'tcha?"

"Yes. From Rekk."

"Sure. And my Girl From Mars shipped. So the way I figure it, why don't you come along with the show? You can have the same setup, thirty a week and chow, travel around and see the country. Nobody to tell you what to do or when to do it, see? Your own boss. Free. Get it—free?"

He wanted it to sound good. Sort of subtle, about being free. Even if she was a whack, she had enough sense to bust out and she probably knew she'd have to keep moving. Not that he'd let her tie up with the show, that was all con, but he wanted her to go for the deal. Then he could start.

"But that is not what you speak. Hungry—"

Ah, to hell with it! You don't waste your breath on a screwball. And here in the dark she wasn't a screwball. She was a disheroo, a tall blonde, hot, better than Mitzie, damn Mitzie anyhow, she was here and he could feel her, feel the warmth just busting out of her—

Ace put his hands on her shoulders.

"Hungry, huh? Well, don't you worry about that, sister. I'll take care of you. All you gotta do is cooperate."

Damn it! He heard the mumbling now, the gang was coming back, filing into the tent, climbing up on platforms and scraping chairs. He wouldn't have time.

But what the hell, he was behind the curtain, it was dark, he'd keep quiet and make her keep quiet and they could sneak out later. Besides, his hands were on her shoulders. Ace

felt her lean against him, felt those curves, solid. Instead of drawing back, she kept coming in, she wasn't whacky, she knew what she was doing, this was all right.

SSOMEBODY in the outer tent flicked up the lights, and a thin glow filtered through the canvas curtain. He grinned at her upturned face. Her eyes were wide, shining. He ran his hands down her back. She was strong, eager.

"Don't you worry about being hungry, baby," he whispered. "I'll take care of you."

The heat poured out of her as she pressed his shoulders. He bent his head to kiss her. She opened her mouth, wide, and in the dim light he saw her teeth. They were platinum-colored, too.

Then he wanted to draw back, but something about the heat pouring off her made him feel dizzy. Besides, she held on to him so tight, and she kept whispering "Hungry" over and over again, and now she was drawing him down on the cot and he saw the teeth coming at him. They were long and pointed. He couldn't move, she held him, the heat came out of her eyes to blind him, and the long, sharp teeth were coming closer and closer—

Ace hardly felt any pain. Everything turned to heat and whirled away. Somewhere in the distance a voice began to chant. It was Lou, standing outside, standing under the Girl From Mars banner and beginning his chant. That was the last thing Ace heard or knew. The chant, the spiel.

*"The Wild Man From Borneo—
he eats 'em alive—he eats 'em alive—"*