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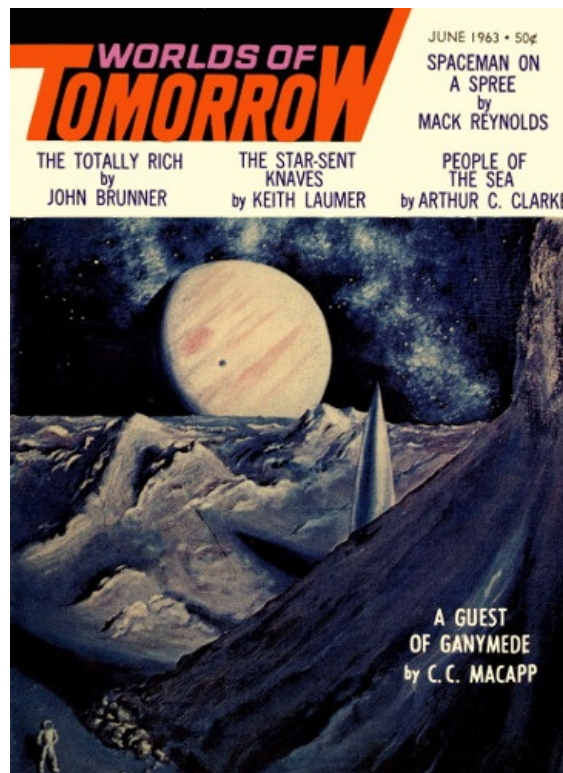
Author: Jr. L. J. Stecher

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CAKEWALK TO GLORYANNA ***



CAKEWALK TO GLORYANNA

BY L. J. STECHER, JR.

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The job was easy. The profit was enormous. The only trouble was—the cargo had a will of its own!

Captain Hannah climbed painfully down from the *Delta Crucis*, hobbled across the spaceport to where Beulah and I were waiting to greet him and hit me in the eye. Beulah—that's his elephant, but I have to take care of her for him because Beulah's baby belongs to me and Beulah has to take care of it—kept us apart until we both cooled down a little. Then, although still somewhat dubious about it, she let us go together across the field to the spaceport bar.

I didn't ask Captain Hannah why he had socked me.

Although he has never been a handsome man, he usually has the weathered and austere dignity that comes from plying the remote reaches among the stars. Call it the Look of Eagles. Captain Hannah had lost the Look of Eagles. His eyes were swollen almost shut; every inch of him that showed was a red mass of welts piled on more welts, as though he had tangled with a hive of misanthropic bees. The gold-braided hat of his trade was not clamped in its usual belligerent position slightly over one eye. It was riding high on his head, apparently held up by more of the ubiquitous swellings.

I figured that he figured that I had something to do with the way he looked.

"Shipping marocca to Gloryanna III didn't turn out to be a cakewalk after all?" I suggested.

He glared at me in silence.

"Perhaps you would like a drink first, and then you would be willing to tell me about it?"

I decided that his wince was intended for a nod, and ordered rhial. I only drink rhial when I've been exposed to Captain Hannah. It was almost a pleasure to think that *I* was responsible, for a change, for having *him* take the therapy.

"A *Delta* Class freighter can carry almost anything," he said at last, in a travesty of his usual forceful voice. "But some things it should never try."

He lapsed back into silence after this uncharacteristic admission. I almost felt sorry for him, but just then Beulah came racking across the field with her two-ton infant in tow, to show her off to Hannah. I walled off my pity. He had foisted those two maudlin mastodons off onto me in one of our earlier deals, and if I had somehow been responsible for his present troubles, it was no more than he deserved. I rated winning for once.

"You *did* succeed in getting the marocca to Gloryanna III?" I asked anxiously, after the elephants had been admired and sent back home. The success of that venture—even if the job had turned out to be more difficult than we had expected—meant an enormous profit to both of us. The fruit of the marocca is delicious and fabulously expensive. The plant grew only on the single planet Mypore II. Transshipped seeds invariably failed to germinate, which explained its rarity.

The Myporians were usually, and understandably, bitterly, opposed to letting any of the living plants get shipped off their planet. But when I offered them a sizable piece of cash plus a perpetual share of the profits for letting us take a load of marocca plants to Gloryanna III, they relented and, for the first time in history, gave their assent. In fact, they had seemed delighted.

"I got them there safely," said Captain Hannah.

"And they are growing all right?" I persisted.

"When I left, marocca was growing like mad," said Captain Hannah.

I relaxed and leaned back in my chair. I no longer felt the need of rhial for myself. "Tell me about it," I suggested.

"It was you who said that we should carry those damn plants to Gloryanna III," he said balefully. "I ought to black your other eye."

"Simmer down and have some more rhial," I told him. "Sure I get the credit for that. Gloryanna III is almost a twin to Mypore II. You know that marocca takes a very special kind of environment. Bright sun most of the time—that means an almost cloudless environment. A very equable climate. Days and nights the same length and no seasons—that means no ecliptical and no axial tilt. But our tests showed that the plants had enough tolerance to cause no trouble in the trip in *Delta Crucis*." A light dawned. "Our tests were no good?"

"Your tests were no good," agreed the captain with feeling. "I'll tell you about it first, and *then* I'll black your other eye," he decided.

"You'll remember that I warned you that we should take some marocca out into space and solve any problems we might find before committing ourselves to hauling a full load of it?" asked Captain Hannah.

"We couldn't," I protested. "The Myporians gave us a deadline. If we had gone through all of that rigamarole, we would have lost the franchise. Besides, they gave you full written instructions about what to do under all possible circumstances."

"Sure. Written in Myporian. A very difficult language to translate. Especially when you're barricaded in the head."

I almost asked him why he had been barricaded in the bathroom of the *Delta Crucis*, but I figured it was safer to let him tell me in his own way, in his own time.

"Well," he said, "I got into parking orbit around Mypore without any trouble. The plastic film kept the water in the hydroponic tanks without any trouble, even in a no-gravity condition. And by the time I had lined up for Gloryanna and Jumped, I figured, like you said, that the trip would be a cakewalk.

"Do you remember how the plants always keep their leaves facing the sun? They twist on their stems all day, and then they go on twisting them all night, still pointing at the underground sun, so that they're aimed right at sunrise. So the stem looks like a corkscrew?"

I nodded. "Sure. That's why they can't stand an axial tilt. They 'remember' the rate and direction of movement, and keep it up during the night time. So what? We had that problem all figured out."

"You think so? That solution was one of yours, too, wasn't it?" He gazed moodily at his beaker of rhial. "I must admit it sounded good to me, too. In Limbo, moving at multiple light-speeds, the whole Universe, of course, turns into a bright glowing spot in our direction of motion, with everything else dark. So I lined up the *Delta Crucis* perpendicular to her direction of motion, put a once-every-twenty-one hour spin on her to match the rotation rates of Mypore II and Gloryanna III, and uncovered the view ports to let in the light. It gradually brightened until 'noon time', with the ports pointing straight at the light source, and then dimmed until we had ten and one-half hours of darkness.

"Of course, it didn't work."

"For Heaven's sake, why not?"

"For Heaven's sake why should it? With no gravity for reference, how were the plants supposed to know that the 'sun' was supposed to be moving?"

"So what did you do?" I asked, when that had sunk in. "If the stem doesn't keep winding, the plants die; and they can only take a few extra hours of night time before they run down."

"Oh," said Captain Hannah in quiet tones of controlled desperation, "it was very simple. I just put enough spin on the ship to make artificial gravity, and then I strung a light and moved it every fifteen minutes for ten and one-half hours, until I had gone halfway around the room. Then I could turn the light off and rest for ten and one-half hours. The plants liked it fine.

"Of course, first I had to move all the hydroponic tanks from their original positions perpendicular to the axial thrust line of the ship to a radial position. And because somehow we had picked up half of the plants in the northern hemisphere of Mypore and the other half in the southern hemisphere, it turned out that half of the plants had a sinistral corkscrew and the other half had a dextral. So I had to set the plants up in two different rooms, and run an artificial sun for each, going clockwise with one, widdershins with the other.

"I won't even talk about what I went through while I was shifting the hydroponic tanks, when all the plastic membranes that were supposed to keep the water in place started to break."

"I'd like to know," I said sincerely.

He stared at me in silence for a moment. "Well, it filled the cabin with great solid bubbles of water. Water bubbles will oscillate and wobble like soap bubbles," he went on dreamily, "but of course, they're not empty, like soap bubbles. The surface acts a little like a membrane, so that sometimes two of the things will touch and gently bounce apart without joining. But just try *touching* one of them. You could drown—I almost did. Several times.

"I got a fire pump—an empty one. You know the kind; a wide cylinder with a piston with a handle, and a hose that you squirt the water out of, or can suck water in with. The way you use it is, you float up on a big ball of water, with the pump piston down—closed. You carefully poke the end of the hose into the ball of water, letting only the metal tip touch. *Never* the hose. If you let the hose touch, the water runs up it and tries to drown you. Then you pull up on the piston, and draw all the water into the cylinder. Of course, you have to hold the pump with your feet while you pull the handle with your free hand."

"Did it work?" I asked eagerly.

"Eventually. Then I stopped to think of what to do with the water. It was full of minerals and manure and such, and I didn't want to introduce it into the ship's tanks."

"But you solved the problem?"

"In a sense," said the captain. "I just emptied the pump back into the air, ignored the bubbles, repositioned the tanks, put spin on the ship and then ladled the liquid back into the tanks with a bucket."

"Didn't you bump into a lot of the bubbles and get yourself dunked a good deal while you were working with the tanks?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't say. By that time I was ignoring them. It was that or suicide. I had begun to get the feeling that they were stalking me. So I drew a blank."

"Then after that you were all right, except for the tedium of moving the lights around?" I asked him. I answered myself at once. "No. There must be more. You haven't told me why you hid out in the bathroom, yet."

"Not yet," said Captain Hannah. "Like you, I figured I had the situation fairly well under control, but like you, I hadn't thought things through. The plastic membranes hadn't torn when we brought the tanks in board the *Delta Crucis*. It never occurred to me to hunt around for the reasons for the change. But I wouldn't have had long to hunt anyway, because in a few hours the reasons came looking for me.

"They were a tiny skeeter-like thing. A sort of midge or junior grade mosquito. They had apparently been swimming in the water during their larval stage. Instead of making cocoons for themselves, they snipped tiny little pieces of plastic to use as protective covers in the pupal stage. I guess they were more like butterflies than mosquitoes in their habits. And now they were mature.

"There were thousands and thousands of them, and each one of them made a tiny, maddening whine as it flew."

"And they bit? That explains your bumps?" I asked sympathetically.

"Oh, no. These things didn't bite, they itched. And they got down inside of everything they could get down inside, and clung. That included my ears and my eyes and my nose.

"I broke out a hand sprayer full of a DDT solution, and sprayed it around me to try to clear the nearby air a little, so that I could have room to think. The midges loved it. But the plants that were in reach died so fast that you could watch their leaves curl up and drop off.

"I couldn't figure whether to turn up the fans and dissipate the cloud—by spreading it all through the ship—or whether to try to block off the other plant room, and save it at least. So I ended up by not doing anything, which was the right thing to do. No more plants died from the DDT.

"So then I did a few experiments, and found that the regular poison spray in the ship's fumigation system worked just fine. It killed the bugs without doing the plants any harm at all. Of course, the fumigation system is designed to work with the fumigator off the ship, because it's poisonous to humans too.

"I finally blocked the vents and the door edges in the head, after running some remote controls into there, and then started the fumigation system going. While I was sitting there with nothing much to do, I tried to translate what I could of the Myporian instructions. It was on page eleven that it mentioned casually that the midges—the correct word is carolla—are a necessary part of the life cycle of the marocca. The larvae provide an enzyme without which the plants die.

"Of course. I immediately stopped slapping at the relatively few midges that had made their way into the head with me, and started to change the air in the ship to get rid of the poison. I knew it was too late before I started, and for once I was right.

"The only live midges left in the ship were the ones that had been with me during the fumigation process. I immediately tried to start a breeding ground for midges, but the midges didn't seem to want to cooperate. Whatever I tried to do, they came back to me. I was the only thing they seemed to love. I didn't dare bathe, or scratch, or even wriggle, for fear of killing more of them. And they kept on itching. It was just about unbearable, but I bore it for three interminable days while the midges died one by one. It was heartbreaking—at least, it was to me.

"And it was unnecessary, too. Because apparently the carolla had already laid their eggs, or whatever it is that they do, before I had fumigated them. After my useless days of agony, a new batch came swarming out. And this time there were a few of a much larger thing with them—something like an enormous moth. The new thing just blundered around aimlessly.

"I lit out for the head again, to keep away from that intolerable whining. This time I took a luxurious shower and got rid of most of the midges that came through the door with me. I felt almost comfortable, in fact, until I resumed my efforts to catch up on my reading.

"The mothlike things—they are called dingleburys—also turn out to provide a necessary enzyme. They are supposed to have the same timing of their life cycle as the carolla. Apparently the shaking up I had given their larvae in moving the tanks and dipping the water up in buckets and all that had inhibited them in completing their cycle the first time around.

"And the reason they had the same life cycle as the carolla was that the adult dinglebury will eat only the adult carolla, and it has to fill itself full to bursting before it will reproduce. If I had the

translation done correctly, they were supposed to dart gracefully around, catching carolla on the wing and stuffing themselves happily.

"I had to find out what was wrong with my awkward dingleburys. And that, of course, meant going out into the ship again. But I had to do that anyway, because it was almost 'daylight', and time for me to start shifting the lights again.

"The reason for the dingleburys' problem is fairly obvious. When you set up artificial gravity by spinning a ship, the gravity is fine down near the skin where the plants are. But the gravity potential is very high, and it gets very light up where things fly around, going to zero on the middle line of the ship. And the unfamiliar gravity gradient, together with the Coriolis effect and all, makes the poor dingleburys dizzy, so they can't catch carolla.

"And if you think I figured all that out about dingleburys getting dizzy at the time, in that madhouse of a ship, then you're crazy. What happened was that I saw that there was one of the creatures that didn't seem to be having any trouble, but was acting like the book said it should. I caught it and examined it. The poor thing was blind, and was capturing her prey by sound alone.

"So I spent the whole day—along with my usual chore of shifting the lights—blindfolding dingleburys. Which is a hell of a sport for a man who is captain of his own ship."

I must say that I agreed with him, but it seemed to be a good time for me to keep my mouth shut.

"Well, after the dingleburys had eaten and propagated, they became inquisitive. They explored the whole ship, going into places I wouldn't have believed it to be possible for them to reach, including the inside of the main computer, which promptly shorted out. I finally figured that one of the things had managed to crawl up the cooling air exhaust duct, against the flow of air, to see what was going on inside.

"I didn't dare to get rid of the things without checking my book, of course, so it was back to the head for me. 'Night' had come again—and it was the only place I could get any privacy. There were plenty of the carolla left to join me outside.

"I showered and swatted and started to read. I got as far as where it said that the dingleburys continued to be of importance, and then I'm afraid I fell asleep.

"I got up with the sun the next morning. Hell, I had to, considering that it was I who turned the sun on! I found that the dingleburys immediately got busy opening small buds on the stems of the marocca plants. Apparently they were pollinating them. I felt sure that these buds weren't the marocca blossoms from which the fruit formed—I'd seen a lot of those while we were on Mypore II and they were much bigger and showier than these little acorn-sized buds.

"Of course, I should have translated some more of my instruction book, but I was busy.

"Anyway, the action of the dingleburys triggered the violent growth phase of the marocca plants. Did you know that they plant marocca seedlings, back on Mypore II, *at least* a hundred feet apart? If you'll recall, a mature field, which was the only kind we ever saw, is one solid mass of green growth.

"The book says that it takes just six hours for a marocca field to shift from the seedling stage to the mature stage. It didn't seem that long. You could *watch* the stuff grow—groping and crawling along; one plant twining with another as they climbed toward the light.

"It was then that I began to get worried. If they twined around the light, they would keep me from moving it, and they would shadow it so it wouldn't do its job right. In effect, their growth would put out the sun.

"I thought of putting up an electrically charged fence around the light, but the bugs had put most of my loose equipment out of action, so I got a machete. When I took a swing at one of the vines, something bit me on the back of the neck so hard it almost knocked me down. It was one of the dingleburys, and it was as mad as blazes. It seems that one of the things they do is to defend the marocca against marauders. That was the first of my welts, and it put me back in the head in about two seconds.

"And what's more, I found that I couldn't kill the damn things. Not if I wanted to save the plants. The growth only stops at the end of six hours, after the blossoms appear and are visited by the dingleburys. No dingleburys, no growth stoppage.

"So for the next several hours I had to keep moving those lights, and keep them clear of the vines, and keep the vines from shadowing each other to the point where they curled up and died, and I had to do it *gently*, surrounded by a bunch of worried dingleburys.

"Every time they got a little too worried, or I slipped and bumped into a plant too hard, or looked crosseyed at them, they bit me. If you think I look bad now, you should have seen me just about the time the blossoms started to burst.

"I was worried about those blossoms. I felt sure that they would smell terrible, or make me sick, or hypnotize me, or something. But they just turned out to be big, white, odorless flowers. They did nothing for me or to me. They drove the dingleburys wild, though, I'm happy to say. Made

them forget all about me.

"While they were having their orgy, I caught up on my reading. It was necessary for me to cut back the marocca vines. For one thing, I couldn't get up to the area of the bridge. For another, the main computer was completely clogged. I could use the auxiliary, on the bridge, if I could get to it, but it's a poor substitute. For another thing, I would have to cut the stuff way back if I was ever going to get the plants out of the ship. And I was a little anxious to get my *Delta Crucis* back to normal as soon as possible. But before cutting, I had to translate the gouge.

"It turns out that it's all right to cut marocca as soon as it stops growing. To keep the plants from dying, though, you have to mulch the cuttings and then feed them back to the plants, where the roots store whatever they need against the time of the next explosive period of growth. Of course, if you prefer you can wait for the vines to die back naturally, which takes several months.

"There was one little catch, of course. The cuttings from the vines will poison the plants if they are fed back to them without having been mixed with a certain amount of processed mulch. Enzymes again. And there was only one special processor on board.

"I was the special processor. That's what the instructions said—I translated very carefully—it required an 'organic processor'.

"So I had to eat pounds of that horrible tasting stuff every day, and process it the hard way.

"I didn't even have time to scratch my bites. I must have lost weight everywhere but in the swollen places, and they looked worse than they do now. The doctor says it may take a year before the bumps all go away—if they ever do—but I have improved a lot already.

"For a while I must have been out of my head. I got so caught up in the rhythm of the thing that I didn't even notice when we slipped out of Limbo into real space near Gloryanna III. It was three days, the Control Tower on Gloryanna III told me, that they tried continuously to raise me on the communications gear before I heard the alarm bell and answered them, so I had to do a good deal of backtracking before I could get into parking orbit around the planet, and then set *Delta Crucis* down safely. Even as shaky as I was, *Delta Crucis* behaved like a lady.

"I hadn't chopped off all of the new growth, although I had the plants down to manageable size. Some of the blossoms left on the plants had formed fruit, and the fruit had ripened and dried, and the seeds had developed fully. They were popping and spreading fine dust-like spores all over the ship, those last few hours before I landed.

"By that time, though, an occasional sneezing fit and watering eyes didn't bother me any. I was far beyond the point where hay fever could add to my troubles.

"When I opened the airlock door, though, the spores drifting outside set the customs inspectors to sneezing and swearing more than seemed reasonable at the time." Captain Hannah inhaled a sip of rhial, and seemed to be enjoying the powerful stuff. He acted as if he thought he had finished.

"Well, go on," I urged him. "The marocca plants were still in good shape, weren't they?"

Hannah nodded. "They were growing luxuriously." He nodded his head a couple of more times, in spite of the discomfort it must have given him.

He said, "They made me burn the entire crop right away, of course. They didn't get all of the carolla or dingleburys, though. Or spores."

"Gloryanna III is the original home planet of marocca. They hated the stuff, of course, but they liked the profit. Then, when a plague almost wiped out the dingleburys, they introduced khorram furs as a cash crop. It wasn't as lucrative, but it was so much more pleasant that they outlawed marocca. Took them almost fifty years to stamp it out completely. Meanwhile, some clever native shipped a load of the stuff to Mypore II. He took his time, did it without any trouble and made his fortune. And got out again quickly.

"The Gloryannans were going to hold my *Delta Crucis* as security to pay for the cost of stamping out marocca all over again—those spores sprout fast—and for a time I was worried.

"Of course, when I showed them our contract—that you alone were responsible for everything once I landed the plants safely on Gloryanna III, they let me go.

"They'll send you the bill. They don't figure it will take them more than a few months to complete the job."

Captain Hannah stopped talking and stood up, painfully and a little unsteadily.

I'm afraid I didn't even notice when he blacked my other eye. I was too busy reaching for the rhial.

END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CAKEWALK TO GLORYANNA ***

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